

## Ben Mali Macfadyen Project Report

"If we will have the wisdom to survive,  
to stand like slow growing trees  
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it...  
then a long time after we are dead  
the lives our lives prepare will live  
here, their houses strongly placed  
upon the valley sides...Memory,  
native to this valley, will spread over it  
like a grove, and memory will grow  
into legend, legend into song, song  
into sacrament.  
-From Work Song, Part 2: A Vision  
by Wendell Berry

300 years to grow, 300 years to stand, 300 years to die. The White Wood will grow for generations, but what of the stories of the place? What of their legacy? Ideas have the potential to outlive us just as trees do, but to create cultures of remembrance takes committed care as well as the promise to cultivate peace in our own lives and never forget the destruction and loss that has been the tapestry of our collective histories. Stories have the power to do this. To shape our reality and through myth create ourselves anew.

In telling of my time in Huntly I could recall the events, the many milestones of creation, the weather... but I found it was the interactions that really made my residency come alive, both from the power of the shifting landscape itself (I had the privilege of seeing Huntly through every season), as well as of course my connections with the people of the town. I will therefore journey my way through a year of stories as they were told to me, in an attempt to lay the page on which the White Wood Story has been written. It is a tale of kindness and creativity, the product of which I hope will live on in some form for many years to come.

The 'great' war of 1914-1918 cost the lives of almost 150,000 Scottish soldiers, alongside an undocumented number of rural Scots who died from trench-borne diseases they had no resistance to. In sharing the weight of this history I found this figure garnered little reaction, particularly from school pupils. Children are bombarded every day by imagery that glorifies brutal conflict alongside meaningless figures of distant lives lost. But storytelling can be used to powerfully make that connection to the personal. To imagine someone as young as 16 facing a swarm of bullets with no armour, stepping bravely into to a sea of wire, mud and the countless dead. Echoes of this loss sit silently in this land for from the trenches, from ruined homes of the Cabrach to cairns of stones laid by departing soldiers who never made it back to remove them. Those that survived to return rarely spoke of the atrocities they experienced. An elderly woman at a coffee morning in Stewarts Hall told me that her father returned from the trenches with only one leg, but his experience was so traumatic that no one was ever allowed to speak about it. Often when he left the house this woman would sneak into the attic to unearth his metal false leg - "to feel how heavy it was". This image of children in the attic sensing the weight of past loss became a central image of the White Wood Story.

This is just one of countless tales I was told. Memories that shape local experiences, so often left untold.

It is through the direct experience of place that stories come alive, and so it was on a clear Autumn day in Aberdeenshire I made my first pilgrimage to the White Wood. I sat in the quiet beauty of the place, sketching the site, reflecting on the movement of birds and wind, observing the placing of sounds and the presence of onlooking pine, birch and aspen. It was almost as if I was asking the wood to present it's story to me. Journeying home I found myself speaking to a friendly dog walker who turned out to be Patrick Scott, a local historian. It wasn't long before I was clambering through the woods searching for hidden caves where Huntly soldiers hid explosives during WWII, accompanied by lively accounts of how the area had changed over the generations. The first task of a storyteller is to welcome in the mythic, and with The White Wood half that work was already in place, testament to the amazing level of care and vision of artist Caroline Wendling, along with the skills of Deveron Arts and local people who had already invested so much into creating the place. The many strands that created the site included oak saplings from acorns planted by Joseph Beus, stones gathered by school pupils in Lochnagar crater, and of course the ancient history of the Bin Forest itself. It quickly became clear that my role wasn't to create a story as much as it was to allow the place and people to share their story with me, and then to to

attempt to use the power of myth to weave a culture of remembrance around the wood. To plant a story with the same level of intention with which the trees were planted.

I had some important questions to ask -

What stories of peace are already being told here?

What could cultures of remembrance look like?

How can cultivating new myths catalyse a deeper experience of place and empowerment towards creating peaceful futures?

The following months I immersed myself in further interactions that stitch by stitch began to form the tapestry of the White Wood Story. These took many different forms - informal conversations prompted by images and objects such as vibrant and insightful encounters at Belhousie care home; formal interviews with local historians, farmers, writers, artists, long-term Huntly residents and those involved in the original White Wood planting; workshops with nearly 300 school pupils using drama, drawing, music, games, writing, walking, sculpture, ritual and nature connection to inspire as well as to gather content for the story; and events in the town to gather stories including two town market 'Story Hairst' sessions and Friday lunches.

By the end of this process I was overwhelmed by the breadth of perspectives that formed the wood and was left questioning which story should be the 'right' one to tell. Then one morning I was guided through the wood by the wise self-proclaimed 'treehugger' Steve Brown, a forestry expert who contributed a great amount to creating the wood. We spoke of soils and trees, of monocrop forestry and peace. "The thing is" he told me, "there just isn't enough diversity of thinking". It was then that I realised that the story of the place and of peace weren't one tale, but a collection of diverse perspectives. Sharing the White Wood Story required a broader vision of 'truth', one that welcomes in all voices to be honoured in sharing their stories. Creating spaces for this to happen is needed more than ever today as our societies become increasingly polarised and motivated by fear. Lack of awareness creates conflict, and there is to me little more powerfully healing than gathering in difference and acknowledging the perspectives of others.

As winter set in I lay the elements out and began to dream. The story that emerged comprised of 5 short tales, each exploring a different perspective on the creation of The White Wood as well as a theme of peace in the context of the Huntly area - freedom (told by ants); regeneration (told by trees); home (told by the land); faith (told by light); and vision (told by children). The crucible for the stories were two containers... the place -the White Wood itself, and time - 300 years from now when the oak trees will be fully grown and stand in a great circle of remembrance. Despite a strong form, this presented it's own problems. How to paint the picture of this future time, as well as the practical challenge of trying to tell a story in the future tense when folk tales all dwell in the past, as well as how to share it in a way that could be engaging for any age and locality.

Once formed, I then shared the story in as many contexts as possible - from brownies to Huntly writers, classrooms to woodlands. I performed a number of times solo, as well as with the support of Moroccan Gembri player Omar Afif, primary shadow puppeteers, Gordon secondary school performers and dancers Petra and Lyra, where I performed direct in the White Wood itself.

Alongside this I led 12 workshops which delved into the particular themes within the story where people could creatively contribute to the story and discuss it's relevance in their own lives. A couple of particularly effective sessions included creating a giant willow stags head which we burned with the scouts, and taking 50 12 year olds to become reporters and interview the lime trees surrounding their school. One session with primary 7's I asked the class to form small groups and collaboratively create an image of a peaceful world. They then moved as groups to another image and were invited to 'wage war' on that world, and I watched as they joyously burned down the houses and left oceans as pools of blood. Finally I asked them to return to their original image, and they were horrified to find their peaceful world completely destroyed. The final stage was to regenerate their land... planting trees where bodies lay, rebuilding ruins, turning bombs into birds. They then wrote visions for the future with the recognition of all that had already been lost. It was exercises like these that really embedded the teachings of the story in a new way, inviting people to claim it as their own and step into their role in creating the peaceful future we all long for.

Alongside this journey of creating the story, I was also engaging in ways ecology and peace on a local level also play out in the global context. December 2015 marked COP21, the seminal global climate negotiations in Paris. In support of action to combat climate chaos we created a local event to gather around concerns and share some inspiring projects that offer local solutions. I shared a piece of the ancient epic of Gilgamesh, where our hero looks over an ocean of death and makes his choice about how he journeys on, for destruction or regeneration. We had some brilliant

speakers, and it was inspiring to me to see people from the area united in their commitments to sustainability.

Another big part of the project was to cycle all the way from the White Wood to Paris for COP21 carrying one of the original oak saplings. We created postcards inviting passing strangers to imagine the world the tree will see in 300 years, planned the route and I was all set to go. Then the Paris attacks happened. Suddenly the urgency to make connections between peace and ecology, between the violence escalating in the world and the need to make peace with place and people felt so much more urgent. I hoisted a white flag on my bike and set off. On the way I spoke to as many people as I could about peace. Not the anger, fear and retaliation rife in the media, but peace. After an epic journey of ice and hail, remote mountain and urban sprawl I arrived in Paris alongside 130 others who had cycled from London. We triumphantly cascaded past the Arc du Triumph, and it really felt like people power would be the change needed to meet this global crises head on. The small oak now rests in a small peach orchard in the outskirts of the city, marking a thread that runs all the way back to Huntly and The White Wood. A symbol of peace both with nature and across humanity.

Ghandi once said that if we are to make peace we must start with the children. To share diverse stories of care and model a different way of being that invites connection over fear and separation. This project has been a deeply humbling journey, meeting local people of every age and hearing their perspectives and visions. The project would not have been possible without the extraordinary commitment of the Deveron Arts team, in particular to the skill and attention of Rachael who supported my ambitious visions right through the year. Huge gratitude is also required for the teachers, historians, students, care home residents and other community members that contributed to the creation of The White Wood Story. It has been a privilege to be a part of this visionary project.

There is little that is certain about our future, but the kindness I experienced in Huntly has offered me hope in the truth that we create our future. Who knows, perhaps in 300 years the story will be lived in the White Wood, standing as testament to the generations that stood for a different, more peaceful future.