



FEST Conference 2017 – TERMONFECKIN (Ireland)

Report by Nuala Hayes

When Storytellers of Ireland proposed to host FEST, the Federation for European Storytelling Annual Conference in Ireland in 2017, our suggestion was based on the fact that we had located a beautiful and most suitable venue for a gathering of European storytellers at the Irish Countrywomen's Association Conference Centre, An Grianán in Termonfeckin Co. Louth.

Close to Baltray, Baile Trá, at the mouth of the River Boyne, with access to Newgrange and other megalithic sites in an area immersed in legends and stories, it seemed that the fact that we were also close to the border with Northern Ireland () suggested that the theme Storytelling in Borderlands would be appropriate in a contemporary cultural context, and also allow us to explore the rich musical and oral culture of Oriel with our visitors.

The programme was developed by a voluntary committee from Storytellers of Ireland, who set about applying for funding from Arts and Local Councils, both North and South of the border.

Nuala Hayes, liaised with the Executive Committee of The Federation for European Storytelling, as the plans for the conference and the Post FEST International Festival developed.

Work for the delivery of the conference and festival began soon after the 2016 Conference in Paris in June. We took account, in the programming, the broad requirements of the European organisations, which is to create a practical and useful network which will include in the future all the countries of Europe. So, issues such as minority languages, bilingualism and the current situation regarding migration and refugees, we very much part of our thinking as we devised a programme which would appeal to as many as we could accommodate.

The fact that we liaised in advance with our funders in Co. Louth and at the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon meant that we could explain our requirements to them and emphasise the need for support for administration and well as the cultural programme in Armagh and Louth.

The process of applying for funding took up about 50% of our time throughout the year, but, in the end, we were very satisfied that in the main we achieved what we had set out to do. The bulk of the work in applying and negotiating the funding applications was carried out by Jack Lynch, Nuala Hayes, Frances Quinn (Armagh) and Laura Mulkeen who subsequently became the administrator of the project.



We were greatly helped in the complexities of booking 110 delegates from 29 different countries, including U.S.A, Canada and Australia by the administrative staff at Alden Biesen in Belgium, where FEST is legally situated. Guy Tilkin, the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of FEST is Director at Alden Biesen and made this arrangement possible.

Aoife Demel of the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray and a member of from Storytellers of Ireland was the co-ordinator of this along with Anne-Marie Vandeweyer from Alden Biesen.

The conference programme is available [here](#).

The invitation to members of FEST to apply to attend the conference was published on the website at the end of March 2017, with a deadline of May 10th for all. There was also a facility for non-members to apply as observers. Each application was approved by FEST Executive Committee.

It was clear that there was an increase in applications in comparison to previous years and before the deadline, we were already at full capacity. We had asked delegates to indicate their interest in post FEST Storytelling in South Armagh and this was also at 70%.

In the end, we had to close bookings before the end date. However we made every effort to include all FEST members, by filling all the bed spaces, including the four-bed bunk-rooms at An Grianán. Similarly, in South Armagh, visitors were accommodated despite shortage of accommodation at Mid Summer.

Our volunteer group was augmented, closer to the events by Liz Weir, Mary Walsh, Jean Ryan and Máirín Mhic Lochlainn, bringing us in total to 8 people. Sofilia Tsorteki from Greece also volunteered at the conference.

Two bungalows were reserved at An Grianán, on the evening of June 20th to facilitate Storytellers of Ireland preparation and the first meeting of FEST Executive committee, at which Nuala attended.

We had planned each day of the conference in detail, down to the exact timings for tea breaks and we were greatly facilitated by the flexibility of the staff at An Grianán over the four days of the conference. We were also very fortunate that Dave Powles was available for sound and lighting for the duration, in particular for the Ancient Kingdom of Oriel Concert on June 22nd at An Grianán and also in Tí Chulainn in Mullaghbawn in South Armagh for the storytelling concerts. Dave recorded the presentations that opened the conference. His experience and his flexibility meant that we were able to present and deliver FEST at a high level of professionalism.

Both of the concerts, at An Grianán and Tí Chulainn were open to the public. We also had a number of people, from different parts of Ireland, who participated on a daily basis.



Publicity and Dissemination of Information

Storytelling at Borderlands in South Armagh was featured in an RTE Television Nationwide Report which was aired prior to the Conference and International Festival. The piece can be viewed here:

https://1drv.ms/v/s!Am2SPn_6eeXAp3VLiSPY8hTQGM2u

Frances Quinn did a number of Interviews on local radio in Armagh, and on BBC Radio's 'Your Place and Mine'.

Jack Lynch and Nuala Hayes, did an extended interview on the Morning Show on LMFM.

Suzanne Lennon, Independent Radio Producer, who attended the conference and Festival, is compiling a radio documentary for BBC World Service, and for the FEST and SOI Archives.

June 21st

Midsummers Eve on was celebrated with fire and special food from all the different countries and marvellous music on fiddle and pipes by local musicians, Gerry O'Connor and Tiarnan O Duinchín. Representatives from each country spoke about midsummer traditions in their part of the world. Understandably, Midsummer in the Northern Hemisphere is a far bigger event than in the Mediterranean regions, where heat and sunshine are in no short supply. In the more Northerly areas, the celebrations around collecting herbs, and fertility ceremonies and fire are shared in many countries with our own customs in Ireland, on St. John's Eve.

June 22nd

Presentations on Day One of the conference by Dr. Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Jane O'Hanlon and Katie Lowry will be available on the Storytellers of Ireland website shortly.

The first afternoon session dealt with Information on FEST Network Project Strands, further details of which were explored throughout the conference and will be available on the FEST website. As is the report from Martin Manasse of Society for Storytelling UK.

Seven broad-ranging workshops were held during the afternoon, and each one was well attended. Due to pressure of time, and the preparation of the hall for the evening concert, it was not possible to give immediate feedback from these sessions, but the reports from them were very positive.

The evening Concert with musicians and singers from Louth and Armagh and three storytellers from SOI, who told extracts from the Táin, with music to whet the appetites for the visit to Armagh on the



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following day, was top class. For this we are indebted to the commitment and talents of Colum Sands, the O'Connor Family, Sylvia Crawford, Len Graham and Gerry Cullen.

This concert was filmed for archival purposes by Brian Doyle of The Irish Traditional Music Archive.

June 23rd

The memorable visit to Emhain Mhacha, and Armagh City and the Lord Mayor's reception followed by workshops at the Market Place are described by Frances Quinn [here](#).

Back for dinner at 7.30 pm. at An Grianán, after which Fergal O'Brien, Briege Quinn and Finbar Magee from Mullaghbawn provided great entertainment with dancing, singing and general craic which carried on in the drawing room until the wee hours, but not before the flame was passed ceremoniously from Ireland to Slovenia for next year's FEST which will take place in Ljubljana in 2018.

June 24th

An early start again, where delegates were divided into groups to discuss and brainstorm ideas for the various strands of the upcoming Network Grant.

This will be the first time the Federation for European Storytelling is acknowledged as a European Network worthy of support and development under the Creative Europe initiative and also by the European Voices of Culture Initiative for 2018. It is an exciting time for the perpetuation and development of Oral Storytelling in all its aspects in Europe.

The General Meeting of FEST was then held, a budget agreed and voted on and a new Executive Committee voted in.

The official conference ended and, after lunch, some delegates were ferried to their bus connections to the airport and others, 86 in all, to South Armagh for the International Storytelling Festival.

Thanks are due to everyone who was involved, both in planning, organization and delivery.