

A SEALL Small Halls Festival



A visit to the Prince Edward Island Mutual Festival of Small Halls

18 – 25 June 2018

Duncan MacInnes



Investigating a SEALL Festival of Small Halls



The Background

SEALL or Skye Events for All is a leading rural touring promoting organisation in Scotland and has promoted over 1,800 since early 1991. Alongside an Annual Programme we run the mid-summer Fèis an Eilein or Skye Festival since 1992. At various times we have also promoted other festivals under such headings as The Skye World Music Festival; the Skye Book Festival – Aos Dàna; The Skye Jazz Festival and the Skye Swing Jazz Festival.

So why in our 28th year does it seem good to start a new festival? There is often a right moment to develop a project; ideas form and need time to ferment and develop, so that when the time is right, everything falls into place. This is such an example.

We heard about the Festival of Small Halls in Prince Edward Island through various cultural contacts with the area. I was intrigued by the concept and the potential links between Skye and a part of the World that Scotland, Skye and SEALL already had strong cultural links with. Maybe it was time to investigate this concept, which appeared to be developing on an international scale.

I met Cynthia MacLeod of the PEI Festival, at Celtic Connections in December 2015 and over the next two years tried to fit in a visit to PEI as part of Canadian Holidays. I managed a pre-festival visit to PEI in May 2017 where I started to understand the community of PEI and spoke with various people involved.

When I floated the idea with SEALL's management of Marie Lewis and Sara Bain in late 2017 the idea was immediately taken up. Marie has run with the idea and organisation since then.

In early Spring of 2018 I realised that I had the personal time to take a break from Skye and head to PEI for the second week of their Festival with my wife Polly. While this was undertaken as a personal holiday SEALL is grateful for some financial support from the Touring Network's Go and See Fund. The result of that is this report which I hope might inspire other rural promoters in the Highlands and Islands in their programming – and maybe become part of the Small Halls Festival, should it develop, as we hope, outwith Skye's local community.

The Global Small Halls network

The Highlands, and particularly Skye, have very strong links with Prince Edward Island as many of our countrymen migrated there over the centuries, taking with them the traditions and culture of their heartland.

The SEALL Small Halls Festival is inspired by the 10-year old Festival of Small Halls in Prince Edward Island, Canada, and our desire to develop a new touring structure to take great music into smaller venues within our extended community.

The global Small Halls family includes Festivals of Small Halls in Australia and Ontario where local communities have hosted roots, traditional and acoustic artists in community halls, inspired by the spirit of community, hospitality, exceptional music, and fun.



A Small Hall does not have to be a small hall

The SEALL Small Halls Festival

We plan to develop and run an annual eight-day winter festival (plus an informal survivor session) beginning on 23 November and ending on St Andrew's Day 30 November 2018. The wider goals of this on-going project are to broaden civic engagement and attract visitors to the region during the low tourist season.

The festival will feature some of the best names in Scots Trad who will deliver a total of 12 concerts, six sessions and adult and children's music workshops to eight remote townships in and around Skye and the nearby mainland.

We have chosen village halls that are well supported by the local communities, have strong proactive hall committees, and are popular with visitors but whose performing arts promoters and venue managers would not be able to afford to bring world-class events to their doorsteps. We hope that a winter festival, taking place in the "low" tourism season, will eventually encourage visitors to the areas involved, not just from contiguous regions but from the rest of the UK and worldwide.

We are in the process of speaking to the associated schools with a view to arranging children's workshops.

Key thematic aims

- Connect local rural communities to the rest of the world by promoting the power and preservation of place
- Take quality live events to public spaces in remote rural areas
- Encourage inter-generational social cohesion and diversity under a common cause
- Reduce the necessity to travel far to venues (carbon footprint)
- Broaden civic engagement through participation and celebration

We want to engage the communities and small businesses in each village by bringing a "festival" to their location for a day to involve them in the celebration and attract visitors to their area. To this end, we are in discussion with the hall committees who will help us arrange for local businesses to provide catering, bars and stalls; local musicians to open the concerts and play sessions during the day; featured musicians to give workshops during the day and a concert in the evening; and a finale on St Andrew's night with a celebratory cèilidh dance with catering to round off the festival. Our aim is to get the local communities on board by facilitating prestigious events on their doorsteps and involving them throughout the process.

An Understanding of Cultural funding and commitment in PEI

However long one has been promoting it is always good to see how others do it – to learn to share and develop. The PEI Festival has been running for 10 years and SEALL has promoted over 1,800 events in 28 years, along with several festivals – so the sense that PEI can inform SEALL directly how to run events was not the purpose of this visit. I did not go with an aim to learn about event management, but there were many areas I was keen to understand, particularly Cultural Funding and Community involvement.

Cultural Funding

Rural culture in the Highlands has historically relied heavily on agency funding. However whereas 25 years ago one would have sourced such funding from the national Arts agencies, Councils, regional and local, tourist boards and Development Agencies, we are all aware that this is now reduced primarily to Creative Scotland. It seems rare for local arts organisations to gain substantial support from local businesses.

Across the Atlantic the situation is very different. In PEI, as in much of Canadian and the US, community culture is strongly supported by local businesses. Arts Council funding is a small part of budgets. This is obvious when you look at the list of funders of the Festival of Small Halls:



So why the difference? Is there some remarkable benefit for local businesses in PEI in supporting their communities that just does not exist in the Highlands?

Before my visit to PEI I contacted several of those listed above and asked if I might call in to find out what that special benefit was. I got positive replies but in the end did not have the time to undertake a detailed study of business support. And of course, that did not matter. When I spoke to some businesses, to the local halls and the Festival organisers it became perfectly clear – local businesses support local events so that they get local trade in return.

ADL, PEI's main dairy, offered cash funding, but more importantly gave every hall a pile of cheese to help them feed the musicians and the audience at half time. The potato company did the same, as did the jam factory, the egg marketing board and others. The taxi service offered the Festival greatly reduced rates to take the musicians around and the music shop gave two guitars and a cajon for a collective raffle.

What was important – and a major reason for business support – was that at the start of every concert, the names of these supporters were not only read out, but read out with enthusiasm and great thanks. The audience heard the names, understood their commitment to the community, and therefore, hopefully, went and spent their money in those shops the next day.

** Ask your businesses and they will support you. Do not be coy then about telling your audience about the sponsorship.*

Community Involvement

Communities in PEI are disparate in a way that is familiar to us in the Highlands. There are some large towns but many folk live in widely spread townships, each house with its own area of land and each village often lacking a central focus. But the sense of community is there. The Community fire station is of major importance, just as are the various halls and converted churches. The whole populations seems to take a pride in all this.

There is a strong sense of self-help. The Small Halls Festival was just part of the wide range of events going on all the time in PEI – many cèilidhs, concerts, fund-raisers and community gatherings.

** Do not be shy in creating community support. If there is no central government to do it for communities, don't complain – go and do it yourself!*

Of the copious notes I made I will distil just some:-



Emyvale Hall, connected to the Fire Station

The Concerts

All concerts were advertised to start at 7.30pm and at 7.30pm on the dot they started. Doors opened at 7pm, and by 7.15 the entire audience, usually a sell-out, was in and seated – which is why we learned to arrive at 6.30pm to get a seat near the front. All tickets were \$25 (£14.50) with apparently no concessions).

The MC, as noted before, told us in detail who the sponsors were and how the festival could not run without them. They then welcomed the audience. Around half of each audience raised their hands enthusiastically as 'Islanders' and then it became apparent the importance these Festival events as part of :-

Tourism

PEI is a popular tourist destination, and this income is vital to the economy. At each concert the MC asked out where folk had come from, listing most Canadian states and many northern USA ones. Visitors not only had come long distances for the Festival, but within PEI were happy to travel 50 miles each night for a gig. My shout that we came from Scotland was met with admiration. The second night we were gazumped by some Australians and New Zealanders.

But I got no sense that the Festival was just for visitors. There was a very healthy mix of locals and visitors in the audience – (something which SEALL has always prided itself on).

** Do not underestimate the value of community events as a means of visitors really connecting with the community they visit, and thus enhancing their holiday. Community-led cultural tourism is an underestimated financial resource.*

Marketing

The printed programme was minimal – a list of concerts and an outline map of venues. One needed to go online for the details of the event and the hall. There must have been a heavy reliance on satnavs, machinery which I avoid! We drove many extra miles looking for halls in named villages, which were often a cross-roads with the community stretching off in each directions and the hall a few miles away.

Audiences and performers

PEI audiences are enthusiastic. They break into applause and clapping at any point. A slight sense of something special in the playing or dancing brings on whoops of joy.

PEI audiences give standing ovations to every performer, several times each night. What happens if the band does not get a standing ovation – oh, the humiliation!

Stage Presentation

This was sometimes a total delight and sometimes not so! Some venues were beautiful churches, and some had tiny, low stages stuck in the corner of low ceilinged community hall, with just a row of fluorescent lights. PEI audiences come for the music, rather than the ambience, it would seem.



New London, one of the larger halls

Fund-raising activities

Raffles in the Highland style of exotic prizes of a bottle of cheap wine, soap and donations from a previous raffle were unknown. On the whole, the halls ran a 50/50 raffle. Buy your ticket - \$3/\$5. One ticket wins half the takings and the hall takes the rest. Sometimes this moved on to 'Chase the Ace', an adventure into ridiculously high-stake winnings.

Various offerings from those important supportive businesses were handed out on the vaguest of reasons. We won two PEI Mutual umbrellas for being the furthest travelled visitor (then lost out another night to those Australians). The jam company offered two breakfast vouchers, the winner of which happened to find a voucher stuck under their chair.

All good and different ways of developing a rapport with the audience.

And finally

There are a myriad other impressions and ideas gleaned from the visit. We met with Debbie Atkinson again at the PEI office to talk about the financial management of the Festival, which had some similarities with the Highland Blas Festival.

I cannot suggest strongly enough that you visit Prince Edward Island, with its fascinating mix of Scots, Gaelic, Irish, French Acadian and First Nations culture; its red soil, green rolling hills and bright blue sea.



Polly MacInnes and Debbie Atkinson in the Festival Office

Apart from the vents, the food is first class and there are hundreds of miles of tracks for the walker and cyclist. It is an easy flight from Glasgow to Halifax and then only 2.5 hours drive – across a bridge. All just like Skye.

Thankyou to

The Touring Network's Go and See Fund.

Debbie Atkinson of the Festival of Small Halls for providing me with tickets.

Marie Lewis, Sara Bain and the SEALL team who carried on very happily in my absence.

Polly MacInnes, who helped make this cultural visit an enjoyable holiday in a beautiful island

Duncan MacInnes, Creative Director, SEALL

16 July 2018

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'Venue of the Year 2015' at the Scots Trad Music Awards

"SEALL has established a strong reputation both in Scotland and internationally for its innovative approach to cultural programming" *Creative Scotland*



PEI Mutual Festival of Small Halls **www.smallhalls.com**

Concerts attended

2014 Flashback: Masters Meet

Monday, June 18, 2018 • 7:30pm

Kinkora Place

Celebrate the PEI Mutual Festival of Small Halls' 10th Anniversary with one of the most popular shows of the 2014 Festival. With JP Cormier, Richard Wood & Gordon Belsher, Roberts Academy of Dance stepdancers Libby Smith, Hope Smith & Cailyn MacAulay

JUNO This'll Be Great!

Tuesday, June 19, 2018 • 7:30pm

New London Community Complex

Two of the nominees for the 2018 JUNO Traditional Roots Album of the Year Award take the stage in what will be a high-energy, dynamic show, with Còig, Cassie and Maggie

Fiddle & Folk

Wednesday, June 20, 2018 • 7:30pm

Emyvale Rec Centre

Talent from all around the world, in one charming rural hall!

PEI fiddling and stepdancing plus talented singer/songwriters from Australia and England take the stage in Emyvale, with JJ Chaisson & Darla MacPhee, Somerset Studio stepdancer Alexis MacLaren, Mark Lang, John Smith



Coig, all four of them.

Soirée Musicale

Thursday, June 21, 2018 • 7:30pm

Salle Angèle Arsenault, Abram-Village

Renowned Acadian country singer/songwriter Laurie LeBlanc from New Brunswick brings his all-star band to PEI for his first Festival performance, along with new PEI band Lightyearlong, featuring members Thomas Harrington, Nick vanOuwkerk, Taylor Johnson & Ward MacDonald. Laurie LeBlanc & Band, Lightyearlong, Stepdancers Les Claqueuses



Lightyearlong and dancers

2008 Flashback: Concert & Square Dance

Friday, June 22, 2018 • 7:30pm

North Rustico Lions Club

Celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the PEI Mutual Festival of Small Halls with this remake of a show from the very first year of the Festival featuring some of the very best of Acadian, PEI and Cape Breton fiddling and dancing! There will also be opportunities for those who would like to take part in some square sets.

Vishtèn, Troy MacGillivray & Mac Morin, Richard Wood

Strings, Songs & Steps

Saturday, June 23, 2018 • 7:30pm

Murray Harbour Community Centre

The quaint fishing community of Murray Harbour will host an energetic evening of old-time fiddling and stepdancing as well as PEI songs from local favourites Marcella Richard, Larry Campbell & Bobby MacLean. The Lumber Jills

Duncan's blog from the PEI Mutual Festival of Small Halls

Episode 1. In which our traveller makes a preliminary comparison with a Small Hall event in London

"Well I paid all that money so I thought we should stay to the end." The couple at the next breakfast table were discussing last night's gig in the Small Hall in Stratford London (West Ham Stadium, capacity 20,000): a young duo, called Bouncy and Jacy so far as I could hear.

Four days in Premier Inn's finest in Westfield Shopping Mall seemed like a good intermediary between SEALL on Skye and the Prince Edward Island's Small Halls Festival in eastern Canada.



A Small Hall in London

It is not perhaps the best holiday planning to go to London for four days, fly back north to Inverness, then drive down to Glasgow to join Westjet for Halifax. But a few days in the totally new-build urban environment that has grown out of the Olympic venues is an excellent way to focus on the joy of rural touring.

The Small Halls Festival in Prince Edward Island – home of potatoes and Anne of Green Gables, and also to Vishten, whom SEALL promoted last year, and The East Pointers who are still on our wish list – is 10 years old. It is a simple concept: 3 or 4 concerts a night during two weeks in June in

over forty community venues. Nothing new there, as it is a bit like our Blas Festival, or indeed SEALL's development in using various small venues on Skye.

What I am interested in, and why we are off to PEI (entirely in our own time and expense, I might add – no wasting public funding here) is to find out more about local community and business involvement in rural culture in Eastern Canada. Funding for Small Halls in PEI comes almost mainly from sponsorship, not government arts funding.

PEI Small Halls is a Brand which has spawned sister Small Halls Festivals in Australia, Ontario and soon in California. I first sought out Jennifer at Celtic Connections in December 2016 to find out more. In May 2017 Polly and I visited PEI on holiday and called in at the Small Halls Office in Charlottetown to meet the folk, just as they were gearing up for their 2017 programme.

When I suggested to SEALL that we might emulate this in some way on Skye, Marie and Sara leapt into action and have planned a Small Halls Festival at the end of November. Skye halls have responded very positively and we have two, possibly three, top-quality trios of traditional musicians lined up to give us two concerts each night, alongside young musicians, workshop and community involvement during ten days finishing with a big St Andrew's night stramash.

So here we are, heading north and west to meet the good folk and some businesses in Prince Edward Island. I know, someone has to do it. I will keep you up to date with what we find out over the next week. Now I wonder if Bouncy and Jacy have an agent.

Sunday 17 June 2018

Episode 2. In which I am amazed at the memories of touring performers.

Richard Wood opened our first concert in the Festival of Small Halls in Kinkora, PEI. I searched him out beforehand in the hall kitchen and bumped into his guitar player, Gordon Belcher. I told him I

had promoted Richard Wood many years ago. "Yes," said Gordon, "1998 we came to Skye and played with Liz C." Sometimes I can't remember who played for us last week, let alone 20 years ago, and how many gigs ago was that for Richard and Gordon?



Richard Wood, JP Cormier and Gordon Belcher

Also on the stage was the brilliant JP Cormier – search out the YouTube of him playing with Tim Eady to be amazed – and some young step- dancers.

The concert was packed. Of course I did a head count, I am a promoter. Around 250 with standing room only and one of the largest of the Small Halls venues, I was told by SH manager Debbie "so that we can recoup some of our losses."

She started with a long list of the sponsors, asking if any representatives were in the hall. Some were, which gave me my first interview with Mr Jim Bradley, business sponsor from the Dairy Coop. Debbie then

asked where folk were from and went through each Canadian State, with visitors from most, along with many northern USA states and even California. And anyone from overseas? she asked. My shout of 'Isle of Skye, Scotland' got loud applause. We are here, of course, to be noticed! I am afraid it rather spoilt it for the man from Yorkshire.

So with all the formalities over we got on with the concert. It started on time, finished on time, had a brief 20 minute interval with no raffle, no bar and no teas. Canadian concerts seem to concentrate on the showbiz and stagecraft. Richard Wood treated us as if we were a crowd of 10,000 at a major festival and both he and JP, and even the young dancers, were encouraging us to clap along all the time – so how on earth were we to hear the tunes? Several standing ovations later we were out into the evening light. The torrential rain of the day had stopped and the mosquitoes were out. Just like a June night on Skye.

Tuesday 19 June 2018

Episode 3. In which Skye's Small Halls Festival is made public

You have to laugh at the droll Cape Breton Gaelic humour when 'Còig' were announced and only four people walked on stage. No-one mentioned a drummer or guitarist missing the plane, so we assume they count differently over here.

They were, of course, 'awesome'. Everything is 'awesome'. "Sleep well? – awesome". "You are from where? – oh my God, awesome".

Two brilliant young women fiddlers and a tenor banjoist whose role was to have the piss taken out of him by the fiddlers. And the keyboard player, not only from CB but also Cheticamp. I asked the sound engineer who was wandering around the back seats controlling everything from his ipad to forget the others and turn up the piano – awesome.



Festival of Small Halls or a Small Hall Festival?

Debbie returned as MC and again listed all the sponsors. I could see what was coming and whispered to Polly that I would not shout out where we were from. Debbie went through all the Canadian States. The man next to me got excited and shouted out North-west Territories, which I did not even know of, let alone being about as near to the north pole as Canada can get.

And then inevitably "and anyone from overseas?" A pause – the man from Yorkshire was not there and no I could not

let it go. "Scotland" I shouted and then "Isle of Skye" just to make sure.

"That man" says Debbie "is going to start the fourth Small Halls Festival on Skye later this year." Wow, oh my God, Awesome, say the audience. I thought it best not to try and explain that Marie is going to run a Small Halls Festival, I am merely the international co-respondent. So now it is public news on an international scale.

The man from the NW Territories showed me a map of his patch and said he sold insulated water tanks for the residents – awesome!

The evening opened with the Cape Breton Macdonald sisters, Maggie and Cassie, who played fiddle, sang English folk songs, dipped a little into Gaelic, all in their particular Country Music style and then did it all while stepdancing – awesome!

They got a standing ovation, Coig got a standing ovation, and they all came on together for the finale and got a standing ovation. Everyone gets standing ovations at the Small Halls Festival. I look forward to a band in the next four days who don't get one – that would be truly awesome.

So another great night. Time to slip round the back, find Coig and maybe just remind them: Aon, Dha, Tri, CEITHIR, Còig . . .

20 June 2018

Episode 4: In which we win an umbrella.

Emyvale is a properly small Small Hall and is firmly in Irish country, paired with Emyvale, Co Monaghan. It seats 100 at a squeeze, with a low stage and two simple white household spotlights. We arrived early at 6.35 for a 7.30 pm start. Indeed we were at the front of the queue because we have learned from our first two concerts that folk arrive early and things start on time.



Polly first in the queue, talking to a local from across the road.

The format has been two bands, one for each half and they have strict time schedule. The night stops at 9.45pm sharp.

At the end of the first set by fiddler J J Chaisson, Alexis MacLaren (no more than 10 years old, and small) got up on the stage for some step-dancing. We were near the front. JJ whispered to her "Fast or slow?" "Fast" she replied without a moment's hesitation and gave JJ a look as if to say "and if you can't keep up, that's your problem!" I think she won.

JJ .Chaisson is an astonishing fiddler. He chose the opening slot because he had to drive back across the Island to be on his

lobster boat at 3.30am next morning. When he is not fishing he runs fiddle cruises, and as he is Captain of his ship he is registered to undertake weddings and vow renewals. And divorces, but he did not make it clear if he has ever had a divorce party aboard. He also tours extensively.

The Chaissons are a musical empire. Multiply the Hendersons many times over and add in a lobster boat and you get the idea.

JJ was joined by his cousin Darla Macphee, another brilliant keyboard player. One day, when I am a big boy, I am going to take up Cape Breton / PEI piano style. Every tune was Scottish, there was not one we did not recognise. I have never seen anyone shred a bow so quickly.

Because JJ had to head off to catch his lobsters, the second half was quieter with alternate songs from John Smith of Dorset and Mark Lang of Australia. Quite a contrast and the generally older audience took a bit of time to enjoy some audience sing-along and environmental politicising from Mark. But the two won them round in the end, and guess what, they got a standing ovation.

I have noted the lack of standard raffles. But PEI have other ways to raise money. The common raffle has been a 50/50 – buy 3 tickets for \$5 and the winner at the end gets half the takings, sometimes around \$150, and the local hall gets the rest. They also stick a festival programme under one seat and the lucky person to sit there wins two food vouchers. Fill in a comments form and at the end of the festival you get put in a draw to win a whole pile of CDs.

We did not have a full round of Where do you come from? but we won two umbrellas when asked for the furthest travelled. We felt a bit guilty that Skye might actually be closer than Texas. However, Texas seems an unlikely place to need a brolly.

You can see quite a bit of JJ's set on SEALL's Facebook page.

21 June 2018

Episode 5 Concerning Food.

At the heart of the PEI Festival of Small Halls is community involvement, and it seems that at the heart of that is food. Of course food is one of the main reasons to visit PEI.

In North Rustico, the oysters that came straight from the bay into the Blue Mussel Restaurant were to die for, as you can see in my Seall FB entry.

Festival venues are encouraged to provide meals for the musicians, and some snacks for the audience, and this is aided by the generous donations of cheese, eggs, potatoes and jam for hall baking and foods, from Festival sponsors, Associated Dairies Ltd and the Preserve Company, and others.

North Rustico Lions Club came up trumps with their food. The concert line-up included Vishten, Mac Morin, Troy MacGillivray and Richard Wood, all of whom incidentally have played on a SEALL stage. And Troy is heading over to Skye to be a tutor at Alasdair Fraser's Fiddle camp this year. Ashley MacIsaac was rumoured to be in the hall as well.



Major sponsorship from the jam company

This great gig was sadly not enhanced by the lighting. The hall had only a couple of small lights near the stage so it was necessary to have the glaring tubes lights on in the hall. Come on Lions, your hall deserves better than that! But then I realised that lighting to create an ambience is not treated as a priority in most of the festival – it is the music that is important.

All was forgiven when at half time large pots of barley broth and mussels were handed out for free by the Lions. They do know what is important!

So here we are at our final concert in Murray Harbour over in the east, in a true small

community hall.

An opening Country set, a style that I fear does not set my heather alight. But the grand finale came with The Lumber Jills, four young fiddle, keyboard, singing and step-dancing women from New Brunswick who have appeared at the Heb Celt Festival. We need to get them back over.

We have travelled all over the island, seen many halls and heard music from Scotland via Cape Breton, Irish and North Carolina tunes with a PEI flavour, the local Acadian tradition and even French language Country from New Brunswick.

Debbie, Tania and Cynthia and their support team put on a great Festival and I hope we can recreate the community excitement on Skye in November. All we need are some local jam, eggs, cheese and mussels, some musicians and you, the audience.

24 June 2018



The Lumber Jills dance and fiddle with vigour

