

# Celtic Neighbours – retrospective

## A personal account



Beginnings  
Language and culture  
Communities and collaborations  
Projects - content and outcomes  
Gatherings and meetings  
Research and publications  
Omissions and failures  
Sustainability

## Beginnings:

**"Cam gyntaf yw hanner ffordd" The first step is half the journey**

Beginnings often have an immediate cause - the spark that ignites the fire - and on examination, also a convergence of stimulæ that enable and encourage the conflagration to establish itself. The spark that ignited Celtic Neighbours was a chance meeting in summer 2008, at the open day of an art exhibition in Wexford, between Eibhlin de Paor of Ealain na Gaeltachta and Meic Llewellyn of Voluntary Arts Wales. Both were inflamed by the fact that although the exhibition was focussed on new artwork emerging from Wales and Ireland, not a word was seen or heard in either of the native languages, and none of the work seemed to have emerged from the Irish- or Welsh-speaking communities. When at the end of the day Meic raised this question in a plenary session, the convener of the exhibition was clearly pleased. He was Peter Tyndall, Dublin-born and the then Chair of the Arts Council of Wales.

"You're absolutely right," he commented with a hint of a grin, "and it clearly needs addressing. The problem with being absolutely right is that it falls to you to do something about it." Soon after, he offered to find £500 to enable progress to begin. Eibhlin suggested that Meic travel to Ireland again, to meet her boss Micheal O Fearraigh, and the two met soon afterwards in Gaodh Dobhair, Donegal.

**"We won't meet in Dublin," Micheal had asserted. "We come from the peripheries of Europe. Let's meet on our own home ground."** This is an approach that Celtic Neighbours maintained throughout its existence. Very soon they called a meeting of practitioners and activists from the Gaeltachta and Welsh-speaking Wales, which took place in Galeri, Caernarfon in early 2009. A decision was made there to create change through direct action, not by advocating it; to begin a process of exchanges, collaborations and mutual support between community-rooted artists of all types. The first such 'Celtic Neighbours' initiative was a tour by the community choir Cor Theibh a' Leithid from Donegal across West Wales, during which they performed with several town and neighbourhood choirs. As Maclolm Maclean, then Director of Proisect an Ealain in Inverness, commented at the time **"The central aspiration of Celtic Neighbours is no less than drawing together communities that have been separated for centuries by politics, geography and economic marginalisation through shared cultural activity."**

The convergencies that enabled the delegates in Galeri that day to fan the sparks into a flame were several. The two organisations Ealain na Gaeltachta and Voluntary Arts Wales were both already committed to supporting grassroots arts activities in the native languages and had some reserves of staff

time - and committed, enthusiastic staff - they could commit to this development. Ealain na Gaeltachta in fact supported Celtic Neighbours financially, too, throughout its life. Changes within the Arts Council of Wales were simultaneously leading that organisation to seek new ways of prioritising support for the language through the arts. Finally, one of the largest British charities, the Carnegie UK Trust, was at the same time selecting thirty innovative proposals to stimulate social and cultural change, which they would support and evaluate over a three-year period, instead of continuing the open-application system of grant-giving they had previously followed. Voluntary Arts Wales had for a little while been supporting the Carnegie as they sought to engage with Welsh communities, and this no doubt contributed to the trust's decision to include Celtic Neighbours as one of the thirty initiatives selected for support. Also important to the Carnegie was whether we could in that period answer a question: was there sufficient common ground and enough convergencies between the Celtic language cultures to make cross-language collaborations a useful tool in community development?

Reinforced by an annual grant from the Carnegie for three years, and guided and mentored through a series of meetings with Kate Braithwaite, the scheme's Director, we were free to develop a programme of community-based cultural



collaborations that would develop their own momentum and which we'll look at more closely later. But we relished the Carnegie's involvement and support during this early period, and are still grateful to them. Perhaps the most trenchant words of advice during this time came in one of the regular six-monthly meetings between Meic and Kate:

**KB** "It's good how well things are going. Now tell me about your failures."

**MLI** (after a pause) "I don't think we've had any serious failures yet."

**KB** (after a longer pause and a firm look) "Then you're not working close enough to the edge."

## Language and Culture

**"Heb iaith, heb calan" Without language, without a heart.**

Language is not a transparent envelope which wraps and transports homogenised messages irrespective of place and context. Every language spoken in the world is unique, every word infused with the experiences, priorities and value-systems of the communities that live and interpret the world through them. As the poet and musician Twm Morys put it **"every time a language, or even a word, is lost it's the same tragedy as when a plant or creature becomes extinct."**



Speakers of our minoritised languages are not narrow nationalists but internationalists, seeking above all to promote and protect all those cultures that have been oppressed and marginalised for centuries by their larger neighbours, to stem and roll back a tide of hegemony that is close to overwhelming them.

So every initiative Celtic Neighbours supported over nearly two decades was rooted in the native-language communities and involved more than one language -

at first, just in our three neighbouring Celtic countries Wales, Ireland and Scotland, but later closely involving friends and partners in mainland Europe, especially Euskal Herria (the Basque Country), Galicia and Fryslân, with all of whom we found remarkable common ground and also much to learn. At times we have reached out also to communities in Cornwall, Brittany, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Serbia, Occupied Palestine and the Roma. Within the first three years, our colleagues at the Carnegie Trust were satisfied that we had proved through productions and gatherings not only that huge resources of energy and goodwill could be mobilised by creative collaborations within and between these communities, but also that the sense of achievement released by the shared search for excellence was enormous and had enriched several communities in a number of ways.

The pooling of experience and aspirations between people in similar cultural and linguistic situations and the realisation that comes with each success - that despite the comparative poverty of our technical and financial resources we can collectively deliver cultural products that delight and enrich audiences across Europe - is of enormous value. In the words of our long-term Basque partner Asier Basurto, **"we have proven that the solidarity of minority language communities and oppressed nations is built through interpersonal relationships. Beyond big speeches, direct everyday contact with the people of the territory you want to connect with greatly strengthens the bonds of solidarity."** In a later section we'll explore as case studies the progress - as reported at the time - of several initiatives spanning the visual arts, music and drama, literature, storytelling and youth work. In every one, the promotion and celebration of at least two minoritised languages (we don't use the words 'smaller' or 'minority' for language - smaller than what? And are they spoken by a minority where we come from?) has been a central element.

In our conferences and other gatherings we've worked hard to foreground the languages we exist to promote; our first major gathering in County Donegal in 2009 was the first in Europe to feature tri-lingual simultaneous translation. The experiment was very successful and we continued this approach through the organisation's life. In all we do, though, there is of course a central dilemma, that to talk and plan together we have to use a common 'bridge language', usually English. On a small scale and in convenient situations, individuals and small groups have dispensed with the bridge language as much as they could, but it was not till our involvement in the 'TOSTA' project between 2014 and 2016 that we were able to chart a coherent, progressive course through this difficult area.

Arrate Illaro, a bertzolari (performance poet) and linguistic researcher from the Basque Country worked with colleagues from all seven language cultures involved in 'TOSTA' to examine the inherent possibilities and obstacles to multi-

lingualism as the two-year project developed, and at the end produced a handbook distributed in all the languages involved. ['An Imperfect Guide' \(2016\)](#) did not pretend to propose any set route forward, but rather she suggested a flexible process of careful evaluation and experiment. Always respecting the value and usefulness of the shared 'bridge language' and maintaining an awareness of the different levels of expertise and resources available to different production groups within the project, Arrate compared and codified the most successful approaches to native-language promotion within our work. She focussed particularly on areas such as publicity, marketing, recruitment, ordering, evaluation and recording, internal communications and more. The handbook was distributed both in hard copy to partner organisations and others and on line. It is still in use, and I'd suggest it remains one of our organisation's most worthwhile achievements.



**Communities and collaborations**  
**"Nahi dukana hiretzat, besterentzat"**  
**What we want for ourselves, we want for others too**

Once, when he was Minister for Language, the Arts and Culture in the Welsh Assembly Government, I heard Cynog Dafis challenged at a public meeting on why his government was "not doing enough" to encourage the emergence of geniuses. "Where will the Welsh Shakespeare come from?" he was asked. Cynog paused for a moment before replying.

**"I come from a farming family,"** he said. **"Our job is to grow a thick, rich sward of healthy, productive, grass, each blade as strong as the next. In those conditions, the thistles and nettles are strong enough to look after themselves."** Celtic Neighbours was always a dedicatedly grassroots organisation, not working with communities in a social-worker sort of way but always seeking to empower the creative elements within communities through creative collaboration, and in that way promoting cultural confidence and feeding aspirations. When we worked with individual artists, and we have worked with many, they were always artists embedded in working communities, articulating the cultures of those communities and eager to collaborate with non-professionals and volunteers. **"Art to me is always a shared passion,"** commented the artist Ciara O'Flynn who undertook several residencies for us, and **"Singing in Welsh is always a political and social act,"** is the view of the harpist Siân James who headlined at our first-ever conference in Donegal. For a glimpse of how genius can flourish in an egalitarian setting in a small culture, here is a record of an exhibition by our friend and colleague Juan Gorriti from Nafarroa in the Basque Country:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm\\_ckAG9ppc&list=TLGG\\_M-C7JTWwqIyMTA4MjAyMw&t=10s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm_ckAG9ppc&list=TLGG_M-C7JTWwqIyMTA4MjAyMw&t=10s)

The singer-songwriter, protest leader, politician - and lately, football icon - Dafydd Iwan sums it up like this: **"In Wales anyway, the artist never stands outside or above society. They are a part of their society, speaking to all its members and for them. They may be a farmer, a bus driver, a teacher - and in every case, their culture is the sea they swim in."**

Early on, as we sought to answer that key question posed by the committee of the Carnegie UK Trust, "are there resources of energy and goodwill within the Celtic cultures that can be liberated through shared arts activity?" we found exactly what we expected, but were taken aback by the intensity of the answer. Language communities that have been marginalised, patronised, even persecuted for decades and longer can at times, reluctantly, almost come to believe that the

pursuit of excellence is beyond them, and can only be achieved through accessing or imitating the production values and massive resources of the mainstream cultures.

The explosions of energy and joy when members of these cultures share with others the experience of collectively creating excellence on their own terms and within their own environment is humbling to share. The power released when people realise how closely their own challenges and longings are shared by colleagues from other cultures and language communities is dramatic. **"Taking part in the TOSTA project opened my eyes to a thousand new possibilities,"** said Erica Morrison of Proisect Nan Ealain. **"And the thousands of people in communities like ours across Europe who we can work with."**



For similar reasons, Celtic Neighbours always sheered away from the possibility of becoming a grant-giving or 'strategic' organisation. Remembering Dewi Sant's (Saint David's) exhortation to concentrate on the small things - the spark and not the flame, the harpstring rather than the harp - we've always been content to work in the niches of society, the corners often thought of as 'remote'. Many of our most exciting and successful initiatives were based in small rural communities, and we were always proud to remain a small organisation ourselves. Our friend and mentor Nick Capaldi, for much of our history Chair of the Arts Council of Wales, encouraged this approach. **"Why should small effective organisations always want to become big, complicated ones?"** he asked once. **"What is it about this word 'strategic'? If you're doing something worthwhile and doing it well - just do it!"**



**Projects - contexts and outcomes**  
**“Coinnichidh na daoine far nach coinnich na cnuic”**  
**People can meet each other, while mountains cannot**

**“It’s never enough to re-work old material or just replicate traditional themes,”** says Darach O Tuarsig from the drama and media company Fíbín - and lately Chair of Celtic Neighbours - **“what we produce must always be challenging, innovative and new, so audiences and participants alike go away thoughtful and enriched. And - for everybody’s sake - merely ‘good enough’ is never enough. Only excellence is ever good enough”** This was a mantra of ours throughout Celtic Neighbours’ history.

A list of projects Celtic Neighbours has been involved with - either as leader or supporter - is attached as an appendix at the end of this report. To look at them all intensively now would consume masses of time, energy and space. Perhaps the best way to share a flavour of our work would be to consider three in some depth, choosing projects different in scope and scale, and from different periods in the organisation’s history.

**Branwen (2011 - 12)** was a tri-lingual music and drama collaboration, bringing together young people from three smaller-language communities. Young actors from Dingle in County Kerry the west of Ireland and Ceredigion in west Wales worked together remotely for six



in

months, devising a production based on an early-medieval story from the Mabinogi, an ancient collection of mythological stories. The tragic tale of Branwen tells of love, marriage and war on both sides of the Irish Sea. At the culmination of the project, the two groups were joined in Dingle for an intensive week of face-to-face rehearsals and fine-tuning by three young Gaelic musicians from the Hebrides.

The experience was crowned by three very successful public performances. Co-ordinated by Celtic Neighbours, it had brought together a youth amateur dramatic group based in An Lab in



Dingle, the cultural hub for young people Theatr Felinfach in Ceredigion and Feisean na Gadhael, the live traditional music dynamo for the Highlands and Islands.

The production was excellent, attracting three full houses in three nights, but for those of us there the greatest satisfaction was watching the social and linguistic interactions - the jokes and banter, the mutual learning, the flirting, the planning and on-the-hop devising - taking place in three languages, and the friendships developing, some of which lasted for years. As we evaluated the project later, we used our findings to create a [practical resource for other groups](#) embarking on similar multi-lingual, multi-partner initiatives.

**TOSTA (2014 - 16)** Our involvement with this large, ambitious, ground-breaking project - '[flagship initiative](#)' of the Donostia/ San Sebastial European [Capital of Culture](#) celebrations in

2016 and a dedicated effort to promote the use of minoritised languages across Europe - grew out of long-term relationships with communities and



animateurs in the Basque Country. It's a recurrent theme in our history, that everything we ever did was done with human sustainability at its centre. After a number of preliminary meetings, we found ourselves co-ordinating a seven-nation, two-year, initiative comprising arts residencies, educational outreach, the formation of an international, multi-lingual band and the mounting of a travelling exhibition and meeting place that would visit every participating nation during 2016. For some of us used to working on small projects in individual communities it was a challenging and even disturbing prospect, but as momentum developed the benefits to those communities and many more like them became clear. Over a drink one evening in a bar in Donostia, Kath NicLeoid from Skye commented **"It's wonderful. Once our cultures were all scattered, a periphery. Now, we're an archipeligo!"**

The legacy of the TOSTA project is still with us, not only in the relationships built up within it that are still growing and working



across Europe, and not only in practical outcomes such as the projects 'Craobh Abhain' (2017) and 'Atlantikaldia 2018' which opened opportunities for Celtic musicians, dancers and actors to build an international audience. Using the experience and contacts gained, we were able collectively also to support the European Capital of Culture celebrations in Leuward/ Leeuwarden in 2018 and in Galway in 2020 - two other cities determined to promote the minoritised languages in their native countries and further afield. Finally, the step-change in determination and commitment in developing the practical use of smaller languages within organisations and communities, exemplified in Arrate Illaro's research and subsequent handbook, was a direct and immediate outcome of Tosta.

Our key contact in the Capital of Culture organisation was Asier Basurto, who was in no doubt about the value of our involvement. **"The ambition to propose large international projects built from a grassroots and humility point of view has been exemplary for me. In addition, I found in Celtic Neighbours a group of people who knew how to look at any situation with optimism and**

good humour even in moments of urgent discussion, lack of money, technical problems and chaos. My relationship with CN leaves me with all these lessons, as well as having watched the doors opening to dozens of other cultural workers and the networks created.”



**Pontio (2020)** and **Barddair an Cheoil (2021-2)** were two small-scale, closely related, music projects enabling musicians, poets and dancers from smaller-language communities to engage with peers and audiences from a similar culture to their own. Our stated aim was to “build bridges between communities using music for stones and poetry for cement.”

**Pontio** was a tour in Wales by the six-piece all-female Basque music-and-dance ensemble “**Andreina Jolie**” from Iruña.



Their visit was the culmination of a process of exchange that had been taking place for two years previously. During their tour they played alongside –and jammed with a number of native musicians from across north and mid-Wales. Andreina Jolin sing and play 'modern traditional' music from the Basque Country and also from cultures in Latin America that they feel share the same dynamics

of repression, protest, regeneration and assertion. They were invited back to perform later that year in one of Wales' most prestigious festivals 'Y Sesiwn Fawr'.

**Barddair an Cheoil** was a collaboration between native-language singer-songwriters from Wales and Ireland. They came together - digitally at first - during the Covid pandemic to share work and encourage each other to produce new material at a time when opportunities to record, publish and engage with audiences were painfully few. They held several on-line meetings to share work, compare ideas and methods, and perform for each other. Then, supported and encouraged by Aras Eanna in Ireland and Yr Wladfa Newydd/ Culture Colony in Wales, the group collaborated to create a 45-minute screened programme of themed [music and poetry](#) to celebrate World Curlew Day 2021. This was a great success, provoking comments such as these:

**"Don't know how you achieved it, but it felt more spontaneous than many live gigs do. Try to preserve this, going forward - it's precious!"** from Inverness, Scotland;  
**"I have to tell you that I watched the show last night and I really enjoyed it. The music was great! Soothing and sort of healing - a great experience. The Celtic languages reminded me of another language family - my own!"** from Novi Sad, Serbia.



As the pandemic began to ease, the group undertook an open-air performance tour "Singing for the Birds" in mid and west Wales during September 2022, followed by another "Mam Iaith" in the Aran Islands in January 2023. During this tour they made a [short video film](#) to encourage young people to write and perform in Irish and Welsh, distributed to youth groups by Ealain na Gaeltachta and the Arts Council of Wales. The group became independent of Celtic Neighbours shortly afterwards, and several members are still working, separately and together, to promote events and collaborations across our cultures.

**Gatherings, meetings and research**  
**“Aurrera begiratzzen ez duena, atzean dago”**  
**If you don't look ahead, you'll be left behind**

The sharing of ideas, plans, experiences and aspirations has always been an element of our work. Dermot McLaughlin once memorably described Celtic Neighbours' key skill as **“engineering cultural collisions”** and the three major gatherings we carried through each created convivial opportunities for these collisions to take place.



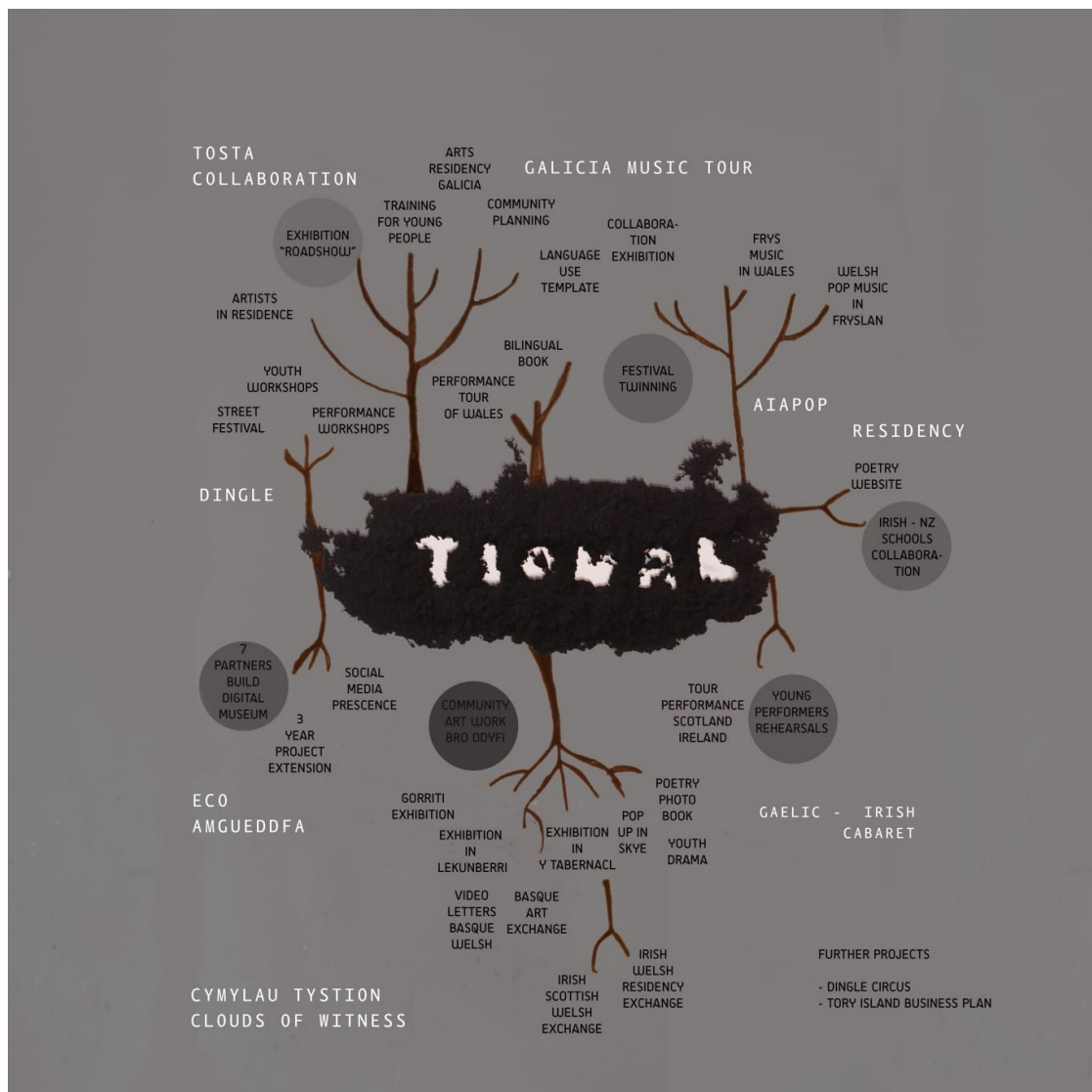
We held three major gatherings during the history of Celtic Neighbours: in Donegal 2009, in Ceredigion 2012 and in Skye 2015. Each was very different - the first a glittering, inspiring, showcase of community-centred arts across the Gaeltachta, the second a mediated journey through the

landscapes of language, politics and creativity, and the third predicated on nothing but the desire to promote and empower new collaborations. At the same time they had much in common, above all perhaps warm and convivial spaces where initiatives could be shaped and understandings sharpened over a drink or two or a full Irish breakfast. Another common factor was the diversity of the participants we attracted: **“I've been to hundreds of these conferences,”** Nick Capaldi told us during Tional. **“once a week, more or less, since I've been doing this job - and they're nearly always excruciatingly boring. The same people, in the same headspace, working their way through an agenda to the point they all want to get to. But this one is full of oddballs, people with different ideas and backgrounds, coming together and gradually finding a common purpose. It's wonderful.”**

As well as a serial task-and-finish organisation, Celtic Neighbours was always a friendship group. The core members, sharing similar ideologies and aspirations and being creatives as well as animateurs, inevitably found each others' company enjoyable and rewarding. They had almost all come together through being drawn in to one project or another, and the

organisation's tendency towards a natural, organic, growth meant that one initiative tended to lead to another.

Naomi Heath's description of the effects on her of Tional is salutary but not exceptional: "The conference came at a time that changed the trajectory of my life in a profound way. Having taking part in an exhibition there, I found myself connecting with many people who thought like me from across Europe. The way I work and what I do as an artist and activist was changed for the better by the people I became friends with there. It went beyond a round table style of event because it successfully gave time for everyone to speak, meet and seek answers to their questions. It wasn't your average conference - the whole event was based in real connections, mutual support and joy. I'm not sure I'll ever be a part of anything like that again."



The diagram above, drawn by Naomi - who later became curator of the TOSTA travelling multi-arts exhibition, neatly demonstrates the organic, horizontal mode of growth that typified our working practices.

Supported for two years after Tional by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Arts Council of Wales, we were able over that period to research a longitudinal survey "But Does it do any Good?" examining the medium-term economic and social impacts of the gathering. Our [findings, presented at the University of Galway](#) in 2018 by Meic Llewellyn and the statistician Marie Mahon of that university, were later distributed by all three native Arts Councils, and demonstrated clearly the massive positive impact of community-rooted arts activities on the economies of rural communities. In 2018 we commissioned an important piece of research on ourselves, [examining the role we had played in cultural life](#) over the previous ten years and considering what needs still existed for our work in the future. Our entire stakeholder group participated in this work, carried through by Creative Cultural Solutions from Dublin under the leadership of Dermot McLaughlin. Dermot's conclusions were complex and considered a number of potential scenarios for future activities, while asserting that **"CN's approach, of working with artists, audiences and communities to create a sense of connectedness and exploration, is effective and has been generally successful. CN has built up a distinctive, perhaps unique, set of working relationships and contacts with funders, policy-makers, artists, producers, and many others involved directly or indirectly in supporting or promoting language and culture in Europe - this is a valuable asset and resource that needs to be maintained and developed."** On several occasions, as noted above, we used projects we were involved with to create case studies of multi-lingual work to share with other groups, and during the Covid pandemic we compensated for the loss of our fourth gathering, planned for Inverness in 2019, by developing the "Snáithean - Threads" series of digital seminars, where those of us working in the smaller cultures of Europe could share ideas, refine and develop activities, sharpen skills and collaborate on new innovations. Each seminar group had a convenor and rapporteur, and met monthly online. Some groups lasted longer than others, some concentrating on coping with and adapting to the impacts and demands of the pandemic while others developed new activities. It seems right in this context to mention again 'An Imperfect Guide', Arrate Illaro's ground-breaking action research handbook on practical language use produced in 2016 as an offshoot of the TOSTA project and itself distributed in seven languages, each one including a summary in our 'bridge language, English.



## Omissions and failures

### “Níl saol gan locht” There’s no wise man without a fault

It’s time now to return to Kate Braithwaite’s question mentioned earlier: “Where have you failed?” In terms of productions, it’s true to say there have been very few failures, and our determination always to aim at perfection was largely realised. No project we became involved within ever failed during the production phase, and none ever went seriously over budget. The impact of the pandemic, however, prevented an ambitious attempt to link twelve arts centres in different cultures together digitally and in real time, which would have offered each audience a window on what was happening and developing elsewhere. It also restricted our attempts to participate as creatively in the Galway European City of Culture celebrations 2020 as we dearly wanted to do. Our more significant and avoidable failures, though, were perhaps those of omission.

Firstly, a result of our determination always to build outwards, encouraging one collaboration to lead to another, was an uneven footprint across those parts of the world we operated in. We played a major part in activities in Skye and the Outer Hebrides, but did not penetrate much on the mainland of Scotland, and the big cities in particular. We maintained a lively presence in all the Gaeltachta but did little among Irish-speaking communities in the Six Counties or in Dublin. Similarly, in Wales we penetrated little in Sir Gâr or The Valleys, and in Euskal Herria we were much more active in Nafarroa and Gipuzkoa than in Bilbao and the west. We built useful, creative relationships in Cornwall, but hardly any in Brittany. Perhaps time would have rectified this had we been granted more of it, and perhaps also the omission was partly justified by the successes we achieved in our heartlands. Certainly, many of our long-term committee members and greatest friends were drawn in directly by their involvement in projects: Gwyn Jones, Dwynwen Lloyd Llywelyn, Luned Rhys Parri and Gwilym Bowen Rhys in Wales; Darach O Tuarisg and Dara Magee in Ireland; Will Coleman in Cornwall, Kath Nic Leoid and Erica Morrison in Scotland; Asier Barurto, Ana Andueza and Mikel Lasarte in Euskal Herria and many others. Without their involvement, Celtic Neighbours would never have achieved the successes it did.

A second major omission was our failure to sustain a level of financial security that would pay our staff a reliable living wage and provide all the resources they needed. Therefore when we needed to replace the original innovators who had thrown themselves into the work largely for love - and could afford to do that - we were not able to offer the rewards and conditions that would have ensured the next generation’s success. In

retrospect, during those periods when we were relatively financially comfortable, perhaps we should have invested in employing a specialist fundraiser on a long-term basis as well as a project co-ordinator.



Creative stress within a committee is not at all a bad thing, especially when expressed and negotiated as sympathetically as it always was in Celtic Neighbours. At the same time, during the later years of our existence, the clarity of our decision-making was possibly limited by one important lack of unanimity; a division of emphasis between those who welcomed the organisation's outreach to cultures based outside our 'Celtic' islands, and those who would have

preferred the organisation to concentrate completely on the native-language cultures within Scotland, Wales and Ireland. While some would have welcomed the adoption of new committee members from Fryslân, Euskal Herria or Galicia, others were concerned about a possible loss of focus and a diminution of our work at home. On the whole these tensions were creative and productive ones, but at times they may have contributed to a certain weakening of the committee's shared energy and mutual confidence.

Finally, there is no doubt that at times there were also failures of communication within the organisation. The Co-ordinator was sometimes too involved in the minutiae of project development to keep up his regular reports to colleagues, and likewise committee members were at times too busy with their demanding day jobs and other commitments to read everything in the quarterly magazine 'Impact' which was our main conduit of information and updates.

## Sustainability

**"Maireann croi édrom a bhfad" With a light heart we live long**

**"Beth fydd yn digwydd i'r 'Steddfod pan fydd y derwyddon wedi marw?"/What will happen to the Eisteddfod when the druids are all dead?"**

Twm Morys once posed this question, thinking of both generational and social changes. Now that Celtic Neighbours as a formal organisation has come to an end, it seems important to consider what legacy it will leave behind, and what might take its place, building on the achievements and experiences we have charted here. **"Nothing lasts for ever,"** commented Nick Capaldi as he stepped down from his role as Chair of ACW. **"What always matters is that we try to ensure continuity in our work."**

A legacy is a lovely thing - sometimes unexpected, always welcome - but a problem with most legacies is that they tend to be consumed, or at least diminished, over time. More important than legacy, then, is sustainability; what continuing active influence will the work of Celtic Neighbours still exercise in two, or five or even ten years?

Simple human friendship has always been a key element in the way we worked, and the friendships of active, committed people can in themselves achieve a great deal. Many of us have been friends and colleagues for almost two decades and in most cases that warmth and mutual understanding remains. The habits of working together, seeking each other's advice, and offering support when it's needed are deeply ingrained and continue to strengthen our activities as individuals. A pattern of collaboration has been established, and the development of exciting new initiatives since the dissolution of Celtic Neighbours is already impressive. The 'Cân y Bugail' project with its travelling international exhibition 'Erfskip' is reminiscent in some ways of TOSTA, especially in its emphasis on drawing farming communities together. A tour promoting music and language use amongst young people in South Armagh by an Irish and a Welsh performer is taking place as this report is being written; a series of exchanges between the Hebrides, Euskal Herria and Wales are at the planning stage, as is a proposed multi-arts exchange between communities in Colombia, Wales and Ireland. All these initiatives involve past participants in Celtic Neighbours, and they in turn are drawing into them a new generation of amateurs.

So far, so good. But one fears that, as the energies of this legacy are gradually spent, the centrifugal pressures of time and work will whirl the key players apart, and focus will inevitably be diminished. While the

memories are fresh and a body of shared experience remains, while the people and organisations that contributed so much are still there as a reservoir of skills, enthusiasm and practical nous, this writer believes that the establishment of a loose, informal and open group of the willing - meeting would be a powerful tool. Meeting digitally occasionally each year when a need arises, with no employees or leaders, and backed by nothing more than a simple, landing-page, website, they could have a decisive effect in reinforcing our heritage, promoting cultural collisions and strengthening and informing important new initiatives. Were one of our parent organisations willing to offer no more than a couple of staff hours each month to administer such a website, the legacy of Celtic Neighbours would remain as a lighthouse amongst the waves, rather than a having been a brilliant spaceship that landed, flickered brightly for a few years, then faded into memory. In the words of Jacob Bosma, who joined us during TOSTA in 2016 and from his base in Fryslân continues to be a dynamo of community collaborations **"It's taken nearly twenty years to build this network, and there's no other like it. We can't let it fall apart now."**

