



A fishing trip to Stornoway was Eddie Stiven's introduction to Highland life

Writing joy for Glenelg multi-tasker

LYNNE KENNEDY profile



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From drama to VHF radio, Glenelg stalwart Eddie Stiven covers a lot of ground, as LYNNE KENNEDY finds out...

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THE day I meet playwright Eddie Stiven at his home in Glenelg, he is preparing for a trip to Arran to perform at a festival; his work is a one-man play — “Seeker, Reaper” — which was inspired by the ring net fishing industry and he takes the role of a herring fisherman.

“I wrote it about five years ago because Jean Urquhart in Ullapool wanted something for the local fishing festival. I decided with my pal Lachie Paterson that we would do a piece on the ring net herring fishermen, partly because Lachie had a great archive of photographs. I also wanted to incorporate poetry by George Campbell Hay, a lot of which is about the ring net fishermen. I couldn’t afford an actor so I did it myself playing this character who was born around 1900 and telling how the fishing took him to North America, where he died.”

Eddie hails from Ayrshire and, strangely, it was fishing in Stornoway one summer, as a young boy, that kicked off his love affair with the Highlands and Islands.

“My father was a radio operator and during the war he had been in North Africa and also at a secret base in Turkey — he was very good at his job which was mostly doing Morse code. When I was four years old he was sent to Lewis with his job, to a little communications outpost on the west coast, so my mum and I spent that summer in Stornoway. I was quite enthralled by it and remember there was a wooden pier which myself and another boy used to drop lines from to catch fish. That sparked an interest in the Highlands that I never lost.”

Eddie was born in 1952 and was brought up initially near Prestwick Airport in a little prefabricated village built by the Americans during the war. When he was 11 the family, which by then included his younger sister Dorothy, moved to nearby Symington and he attended high school in Kilmarnock.

“We spent a lot of time in Arran when I was a kid — which is just across from Ayrshire. I think it was a lot more Hebridean in those days and I loved it. When I was 16 I got a summer job working in Aviemore at the outdoor centre — it was the summer of 1969 and it was just a brilliant time. I did a lot of canoeing, walking and some lifeguarding — it was a young, sporty place then with a good crowd.”

After he left school Eddie studied business and computer studies and then spent a year working for American Express before touring round Europe for while on a gap year. When

he returned to the UK he was looking for a job and kind of “fell in to teaching and further education”. He was 22 and it was around this time that he started writing.

“It was the mid 70s and I had a girlfriend at the time who was an art student and very interested in the theatre so I started going with her. I was also really into folk music, especially ballads. It was around that time I had an epiphany — I realised that myths and legends had been the stuff of drama since the earliest days of the theatre and I became interested in dramatising this source material in a Scottish context. I also realised that these universal stories, and the way they were told — the plots — and even the characters portrayed in them, formed the framework for almost all dramatic writing.”

AFTER four years of teaching he gave it up to pursue his writing career, doing temp work when he needed some money. A few years later in 1981 he found someone willing to stage his first play — “Tamlane” — a piece very strongly influenced by Sir Walter Scott’s collection of ballads.

“We thought we might do it at Edinburgh Fringe but as we had no money, we couldn’t afford a venue. In the end we booked an old church called the Bedlam Theatre for the week before the festival. The first night was a bit of a disaster because the leading lady was stuck on a train so the wardrobe girl had to step in. Then the lights started playing up. A couple of critics came along and I was thinking, ‘Well, I’ve had a go, that’s that!’, but then the reviews came out and they were actually quite good.”

“After that we had some money so we hired an open air venue and thankfully it stayed dry for the whole month of the festival. It got rave reviews all summer and one of the critics, David Campbell, who was writing for the Scotsman, also worked as a producer at the BBC. They were looking for writers for a radio soap called Kilbreck, which was like a Scottish version of The Archers, and I ended up working on that for a couple of years.

“There were several writers working together and we wrote our own storylines — there was no script editor as such. I had an idea that I wanted to bring in a storyline about a travelling community and the producers said if I could do the research, I could write about it, so I spent three days and nights travelling with a family from Fife. It was fantastic — the real traditional travellers

are great storytellers and have a wealth of oral history and I’m fascinated by that.”

After a couple of years, the BBC axed the soap and Eddie began working as a freelance writer. It was around this time, in the mid 1980s that he met a young woman called Donna, who was to become his wife. “She was a graphic design graduate and I heard she had a house in the Highlands that she wanted to let out for the winter. I came up and rented it in 1984 and fell in love with the place and also with her; I never really left after that!” Their son Calum, 19, has now left home and studies at Stirling University, although he is on placement in Vancouver, Canada at the moment.

Although he’s always continued writing, Eddie’s other jobs have been mostly in training or teaching. Not long after he moved to Glenelg, he took jobs on fishing boats and trawlers but around the late 1980s a job was created to train fishermen in safety procedures and, as he had had some experience as a lifeguard at Aviemore and was knowledgeable about first aid issues, he applied for it.

“I had teaching experience too, which I think helped me get the job. It covered the whole of the Highlands so I just went where people needed to be trained. I did it for ten years with my friend Donnie MacDonald who is now the skipper of the Glenelg ferry. It was a wonderful time because we visited lots of different ports and meet a great array of fisherman, all of whom had wonderful stories.”

LATTERLY he has moved into training in the fish farm industry and also teaches VHF radio training. For the most part though, Eddie continues to write, primarily for the stage — he’s been at the Edinburgh Fringe half a dozen times over the years — but also for radio.

His time as a member of the local mountain rescue team spawned the play ‘Wings of the Morning’, which was broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland earlier this year — a mountain rescue drama set at the dawn of the new Millennium exploring themes of change in the Scottish Highlands and Islands.

Eddie’s plays, some of which have had excellent reviews from both the Scottish and national media, have included “The Play on the Wather”, a translation/adaptation of John Heywood’s 16th Century comedy, reworked and rewritten in Scots; “The Cauldron”, a quest tale set in 6th Century Scotland; “The Illuminati” which tells of the conversion of a pagan society to Christianity, and draws

particularly on the mission of St Columba in the 6th Century; and “Under the Passing Stars”, an adaptation of the old Celtic tale of “Daerdrè of the Sorrows”.

He teaches creative writing on an ad hoc basis, and last year ran a course at Eden Court theatre, as well as spending six weeks teaching inmates at Porterfield Prison in Inverness.

“They were great guys to work with but had very mixed abilities so that made it quite difficult to teach at times. I found them easy to work with because they were open to trying all sorts of things and did it all with enthusiasm. Once a week for six weeks. There was a few issues, like you’d have almost a different class every week because someone might be up in court, or have been let out, but it was a great experience and I’d do it again.”

IN the new year Eddie will be going off to America to hold workshops in Oregon, where he has had links since the mid 1990s.

“Donna and I have built a relationship with a college there — Lewis and Clark College in Portland — and they send students here most years and we look after them and give them an introduction to Scotland. They are usually here to study arts and humanities at Glasgow University so we have them for a while before they go and show them around the Highlands.”

For the past 16 years Eddie and Donna have lived in the old Church of Scotland manse, just outside Glenelg. “We bought it after it had been on the market for quite a while, which was probably because it needed so much doing to it, but it gave us the chance to build a bigger premises for Donna who had been making and selling candles in a wee shed behind the cottage for years.” That business, Glenelg Candles, sadly burned down a few years ago as a result of an electrical fault but someone else has opened a similar business in the village which Donna helps out with, as well as her involvement in the group which engineered the Glenelg ferry buy-out last year.

Writing is clearly not just a job to Eddie, but something he is passionate about and I doubt he will ever stop. Certainly, there is one ambition he is yet to achieve; “I’d love to write for film. I’ve not had any success so far, but I don’t give up easily so I’ll definitely keep at it!”

For more information visit www.eddiestiven.co.uk