

# ADULT LEARNER PUBLICATIONS 2011

## COMMUNAL SPIRIT

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POETRY FROM  
ESKDALE HOUSE

'We met before haven't we?'

It's Monday June 2 and I have returned to Easterhouse for a 'post-script' closing session with the adult literacy learners group at Eskdale House.

Upon arrival, Daniel Hurles – one of the participants most closely engaged throughout the whole creative process – greets me with a firm handshake over his zimmer frame, and with an inquisitive spark in his eye seeks the jogging of his memory.

It has been 2 or 3 months since my last visit but I nonetheless find this question unsettling, almost hurtful. I have arrived bearing freshly-minted copies of *Communal Spirit*, intending to celebrate with the group the fruits of our creative labours. But at this moment the transience of the collaborative bond forged during such community-engaging projects seems brutally exposed.

Danny's question is of course a pertinent reminder of the vulnerable circumstances common to all the residents of Eskdale House – a residential home for men who have been homeless, and who are living with alcohol addiction. With the support of the staff at the centre, Danny, Alan, Kenny and Dennis keep their alcoholism in check, never taking the step into addiction-recovery, but staying back from the edge, limiting their intake to a couple of drinks a day. Some of the men at Eskdale are visibly in a state of mental deterioration, with verbal communication not easily possible.

Today the other three writers seem sharp, in a state of anticipation and excitement in fact, and as we sit down in the Eskdale House snooker room Danny quickly gets up to speed too. Later as I am leaving, he will show me all the writing he has done since I saw him, inspired by this process – a whole A4 pad full.

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As I describe in my introduction to *Communal Spirit*, the initial creative writing workshops with this group were within the framework of a creative consultation with Eskdale house residents, towards design proposals for public art within their refurbished centre at Buchanan Lodge in Castlemilk. The participants existed on a spectrum of literacy, and some who I met opted out of the creative writing process, yet for the four men who returned repeatedly, the quality of expression was of high standard from the outset.

Sessions would begin with collaborative writing exercises, using marker pens and A1 paper. The group would jot down ideas and thoughts in response to creative prompts which I gave, and if no-one felt like picking up a pen – that significant first barrier to literate expression – then I would scribe for them as they spoke.

In these initial exercises I would encourage group conversation to emerge organically, and steer it to an extent, asking probing questions in response to what was being shared. My aim would be to stoke up ideas and stories, to have the participants share verbally and textually about their lived experience and inner lives, past or present. We would sometimes look at poetry samples, novel extracts or song lyrics as further stimulus, before the focus switched to individual work, inspired by topics discussed round the table or by entirely new thoughts. Again, if anyone didn't wish to write, I would scribe for them as they spoke. My only priority was to get the group expressing.

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There is a sense of disbelief and even giddiness in the air as we read through the booklet together – laughing and discussing and sometimes pausing for thought. The effect of seeing their words in published form is apparently quite a surreal one for the group. Yet the men quietly connect with the reality of the moment, and I detect a tangible awareness of the value of what they have achieved swelling within the group. This sense of self-worth was present when Tim Turnbull visited the group early this year and will hopefully be present to an even greater extent when Impact Arts hold a book launch in July.

As we close the group thank me for the opportunity, describing the process variously as 'an experience', 'brilliant' and 'Hellbound'. I sensed in final comment from Dennis – quipped, with a smile – not only the dark humour present in our writing sessions and within the writing produced, but also an acknowledgement of the purgative and expressive nature of the process. The men have been to different extents confronting their pasts, their personal limits (including the limits of their literacy); their personal demons. There has been a certain 'rock n roll' spirit to this group's brand of creativity, and of course 'hellraising' through drink has been a central theme of the writings.

As I leave for perhaps the last time, I reflect that some within the group are individuals who have fallen 'out of the habit' of literacy, this now being re-ignited along with their sense of personal expression, verbal or written.

I hope this project has helped to demonstrate that these individuals – ‘written off’ in the eyes of some – have experience and insight of great value to share.

I reflect also on things that might have lifted this project further. I would like the booklet to have a spine. I would like to have arranged for photographs of the contributors to exist in the publication. I would have liked Alan’s ‘Johnny Walker’ poems to have been included un-altered. I would like to have more fully impressed upon the group the reality of the publication sooner, when there was still time for further inclusions.

But this project has been a success, and I have been very glad of the opportunity to give a literacy group the platform it deserves.

