

## **The Shackleton Scholarship Fund - Shackleton Scholar's Report 2007**

### **Visit by Jean McNeil Creative writing teaching and writing project March 20th – April 15th, 2008**

*Jean McNeil*

---

#### **Background**

After visiting the Islands as the British Antarctic Survey/Arts Council writing fellow in 2005 and 2006 on my way into and out of the Antarctic, I proposed to return to the Islands to deliver a series of creative writing workshops for adults and for High School children. These would be based on the techniques for teaching creative writing that I use as a lecturer at the University of East Anglia in Norwich and as a tutor for the Arvon Foundation in the UK.

Veronica Fowler, who teaches English at the Falkland Islands Community School kindly agreed to be my sponsor. I also intended to undertake a personal writing project. To do this I wanted to spend a concentrated period of time in the Falklands, and to consult the archives, the library, and speak to Falkland islanders to learn more about life on the islands, both past and present.

#### **Publicity**

Publicity was obtained through adverts in *Penguin News*, Falkland Islands radio, and through my sponsor, Veronica Fowler.

#### **Evening and Saturday writing workshops in Stanley**

The adult evening course in Stanley consisted of five sessions held over the course of my stay, on Tuesday nights and with an additional Saturday morning workshop. I was very pleased with the turnout; I had 15 students, three of whom travelled from Fitzroy and MPA in order to attend class. I was also impressed with the diversity of the students. As well as native Falkland Islanders there were Australians, a Chilean, Germans and a Spaniard in my group.

I held our initial meeting at Veronica Fowler's house, where we did introduced ourselves and did preliminary writing exercises. The remainder of the workshops took place in Veronica's classroom at the Falkland Islands Community School.

All my students showed real talent and promise as writers. For some, the whole approach of creative writing, which is based around narrative fiction, was new – many had written autobiographical work, kept diaries, written reports or journalism, but hadn't attempted before to write 'creatively'. Some of the exercises and workshops were challenging – I use them at university level - but students tackled these and made real progress. Over the course of the workshops they all developed a new piece of writing.

I would like to thank my students in Stanley for their dedication and their willingness to share their imaginative work with me and with each other.

#### **Saturday workshop at Dunnose Head**

Rosemary Wilkinson kindly invited me to give a workshop on April 5th at the Rookery at Dunnose Head Farm on West Falkland. I delivered an all-day workshop for four students (the general consensus is that we would have had a bigger group had the day not coincided with the last ferry run of the summer between East and West Falkland).

The Rookery was the most spectacular setting I have ever taught in. Panoramic windows offer a wrap-around view of the shore and hills to the South. Dunnose Head I found a dramatic and inspiring landscape, and Rosemary was a welcoming hostess and, in a skill exchange, taught me some felting techniques in her well-equipped workshop on the Sunday. My students on the West surprised me with their vivid writing – their work was imbued with a powerful feeling for the landscape, the history and the way of life on the West. As writers they all had a spontaneity and

depth of feeling. I felt privileged to have had the chance to see West Falkland – both my flights out and back with FIGAS took place on spectacular days and gave me an appreciation of the scale and varied landscape of the islands.



*Jean McNeil and her students*

### **Teaching Year 10 and 11 at FICS**

Veronica Fowler and Elaine Messer invited me to deliver writing workshops to their Year 10s and Year 11s. I saw each class (there are two separate Year 10 and Year 11 classes – making a total of four) three times over three weeks, comprising as many as 60 students.

Many students had an assignment on narrative writing for their GCSEs coming up, and in my classroom session workshops we concentrated on building story-telling skills that would help them to achieve good marks on their assignments. This involved class discussion, reading short extracts, and a lot of on-the-spot writing. Most students were extremely reluctant to read their work out loud (peer pressure) but most really did write, and did the required work, and learned about how to write well and more imaginatively.

I would like to thank Veronica and Elaine for their support and collaboration and encouragement.

### **My own research**

I made two trips to the archives in Stanley. I wanted to know more about the early farming life on the islands in the late 19th and early twentieth century – how settlers came, what sort of land they farmed, how they made their living, and social and family life. Jane Cameron was helpful and guided me toward existing material and photographs that would help build an imaginative piece of writing. I also consulted several books in the FICS library with a view to building up a picture of social life on the islands in the last century, and bought some pamphlets and books to take back to London with me.

I would like to thank the Shackleton Scholarship Fund for sponsoring my return to the Falklands and for allowing me to deliver this project. It was my hope that the community would find the notion of developing creative writing skills attractive, interesting, and worthwhile, and the uptake for my courses proved this was indeed the case. I am also extremely grateful to Veronica Fowler for the loan of her house during my stay, and for her friendship.

*Photograph courtesy of [Penguin News](#).*