

At this year's London Book Fair, Lesley Whyte was a member of the panel that awarded the National Library of Latvia the accolade of "International Library of the Year." When Lesley visited Latvia, she discovered a country rich in folklore and folksong. While there she visited the "Castle of Light" ...

Library for a Land of

FOLKLORE AND FAIRYTALES

Once upon a time, there was an old building and it was full of books. This old building was creaking at the seams and was built on a swamp. The people of the city loved books, so the librarian added more and more books but the floor couldn't take the weight, and it cracked and then collapsed, and all the books went tumbling into the swamp.

Firemen came to rescue the books, but they just shook their heads. There were so few firemen and so many books.

A passer-by offered help, and his friends came running over and they each passed the books, one by one, from the swamp to safe places across the city. When they had finished their work, the helpers said they would be happy to help again, anytime.

It was an offer that was to have a dramatic realisation years later...

When in Latvia you can't help but think in terms of stories. This Baltic country with its harsh winters, intense summers, lakes and forests is home to some of the greatest collections of folk poetry in the world. One of the best and most special stories, is the story of the creation of the new Latvian National Library, christened by the country's citizens, the "Castle of Light".

The Library, built on the left bank of the Daugava river, is the result of a mixture of necessity, national pride and the remarkable vision of a country that celebrates its 100th anniversary as a nation this year.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the revived independence of the Latvian nation, it was soon seen as essential that the national memory be preserved in a new building to replace those housing the collections spread around the city.

The Castle of Light rose step by step until it was thirteen giant steps high. There was a step set aside for the maps of adventurers and a step for songs of the people's forefathers and, the topmost step, almost touching the sky, was the children's step, where all the stories for the young people of the city were to be stored.

The Castle of Light rose in the sunlight and shone like a beacon at night...

Designed by exiled Latvian American architect Gunnar Birkets, who returned to his native country to build his masterpiece, the Castle of Light was opened in 2014, the year that Riga was European City of Culture.

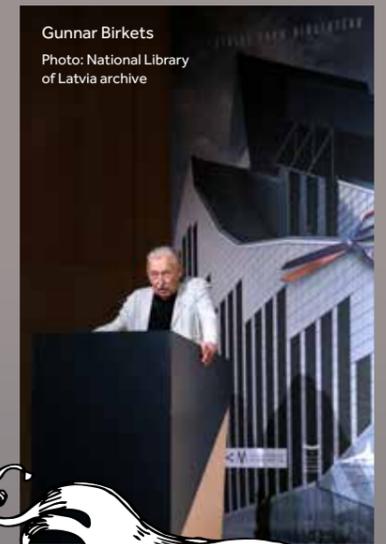
On 14th January, remembering the promise made by the people all those years earlier when the old library building creaked and crumbled, a thirty-thousand-long human chain symbolically handed two thousand books over two kilometres in temperatures of minus fourteen degrees from locations in the east of Riga to their new home.

The people rejoiced, the President rejoiced, the world rejoiced. The Castle of Light was full of books and full of people and it has been that way ever since, until this very day...



Exterior photos: Indrikis Sturmanis

Gunnar Birkets
Photo: National Library
of Latvia archive



- The name "Castle of Light" is taken from an epic Latvian poem and a song about a sunken castle that rises into the light of day.
- Architect Gunnar Birkets died in 2017 at the age of 92.
- In the last year over 700 events have taken place in the building.
- The Castle of Light can house up to eight million printed items.
- Currently, it houses four million.
- The space and infrastructure can serve one thousand visitors.
- Since the Castle of Light opened, registered users have gone up from 30,109 to 132,698. Riga has a population of 640,000.

The People's Bookshelf – Everyone Is Invited

Towering high in the centre of the Castle of Light is the Latvian National Library's People's Bookshelf. These were the shelves that began to be populated by the human chain of books in 2014, when the library opened.

Today the shelves, surely one of the most dramatic architectural statements about books in the world, continues to be filled by donations. Each donation carries its own, personal story and the library invites everyone to contribute when they visit the library or by sending their book by mail. "A Special Book for a Special Bookshelf" aims to have fifteen-thousand books on shelf by the time of the National

Library of Latvia's one-hundredth anniversary on 29 August 2019.

Lesley Whyte donated her chosen book. Here is part of her personal note inside the book:

"I would like the National Library of Latvia, the Castle of Light, to have this book, following my visit on 25 May 2018.

I have chosen this book, because it portrays the culture of my homeland, Scotland, although depicts a world that is susceptible to change, as the stories themselves indicate.

I enjoyed reading these stories to my sons, and then, in turn, to their children. I hope this book will transport the children



Lesley Whyte holds her donation to the National Library of Latvia, 'The Katie Morag Treasury' by Mairi Hedderwick

of Latvia to another world, and that they enjoy reading these stories as much as I did my visit to the Castle of Light."

Find out more at: <https://tautasgramatuplaukts.lv/en/>

"I hope this book will transport the children of Latvia to another world, and that they enjoy reading these stories as much as I did my visit to the Castle of Light."



People's Bookshelf photo: Kristians Luhaers

Daina Cabinet "The DNA Of Latvia"

*Slowly, quietly drives God
Downwards to the valley;
Not a blossom is disturbed,
Not a foal is startled.*



Dainas, short poems, often of only four lines, form a body of work that has been described as the DNA of Latvia and is one of the largest collections of versified folk heritage in the world.

The Castle of Light houses a cabinet of seventy-three carefully constructed drawers. It was used as an editor's tool by folksong collector Krišjānis Barons (1835-1923) when he worked on his six-volume edition, "Latvju

Dainas". Today, these small pieces of paper are listed on UNESCO's "Memories of the World" registry.

The poems reflect Latvia's pagan past, forming a history of the country and its people, the seasonal cycles and the human life-cycle, as well as offering advice on how to live well.

Shortly before Latvia became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, crowds sang dainas in the

country's streets and squares in what became known as the Singing Revolution.

Song, choral singing and choir festivals have always formed a central part of Latvian national identity and these "Baltic haiku", so little known to the outside world, form the core of this great tradition, a true example of cultural DNA housed in the Castle of Light.



Daina Cabinet photos: Didzis Grodzs

