

The Folklore Society. National and international

Paul Cowdell

Folklore Society, Londres.

2015

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Cowdell, Paul, 2015. "The Folklore Society. National and international", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article611.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site (www.berose.fr) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 25 April 2024 at 21:09

Publié dans le cadre du thème de recherche «Réseaux, revues et sociétés savantes en France et en Europe (1870-1920)», dirigé par Claudie Voisenat (Ministère de la Culture, Héritages) et Jean-Christophe Monferran (CNRS, Héritages).

Folklore has some peculiarities as a discipline. Its emergence was intimately tied to notions of national identity, whether as aspiration or consolidation, yet it strove at the same time to be truly international in its scholarly liaisons. We will consider here some aspects of this interaction in the formative years of the Folklore Society in Britain, one of the first societies internationally to use the word "folklore" in its title.

The Society was founded on 30 January 1878 at a meeting of 9 gentlemen near Downing Street in London. The newly appointed Secretary announced that he had received "the names of one hundred and one Ladies & Gentlemen who wished to become members", although he went on to say that only 42 of them had thus far actually paid their subscription. Membership reached 180 for the first year of the Society's existence, and by 1896 had risen to 396.

But the story does not really begin there, nor 6 weeks earlier at "a meeting of Gentlemen interested in the subject" on 19 December 1877. They resolved, according to a short minute in the Society's minute books, to form a Society "for the purpose of preserving and collecting Popular Fictions and Traditions, Legendary Ballads, Local Proverbial Sayings, Superstitions, and Old Customs, to be called the Folk Lore Society".

Folklore as a discipline is often confusing to those outside it because of its continued critical self-appraisal. This has, historically, taken the form of consideration both of what we're

actually studying – what folklore is – and of the discipline itself. The name of our study is a key to our understanding of that study.

Folklorists sometimes seem obsessive about the name of our discipline. This is heightened at times when minority disciplines face funding threats, like now, but the question for folklorists isn't one of tactical expediency, it's one of existential identity. Internationally we use a variety of words to denote our activities – folklore, ethnology – and the variation itself indicates differences in approach and focus. When folklorists argue about the scope of our study and its character this reflects the strengths of our discipline, although it is often read as the opposite.

It's fitting then that the story of the Folklore Society properly begins with the word. In August 1846 the literary antiquarian William John Thoms wrote a letter to the *Athenaeum*. Appropriately enough, given the concentration on naming and identification, he did so under a pseudonym, Ambrose Merton. He encouraged readers to collect, and forward to the magazine, items of “what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature”, such as “manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc”. However, he noted that this material is “by-the-bye more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folklore, - *the Lore of the People*”.

Given what I've said about the interrelated character of the discipline and its name, it's worth noting that Thoms also set out suggestions about what he was describing. For all that his letter provides folklorists with a convenient start point of self-identification, Thoms's reference to Popular Antiquities points to a body of work begun in the preceding centuries by scholars like John Aubrey, Francis Grose, Henry Bourne, John Brand, and being continued by his contemporaries like William Hone.

Thoms was looking to produce something national in character. In that *Athenaeum* letter he wrote that he was aiming for a collation of “the Mythology of the British Islands”. Four years later an advertisement appeared in Thoms's latest journal, *Notes and Queries*, announcing preparation “for immediate publication” of a collection entitled *The Folk-Lore of England*. “One object of the ... work”, the advert declared, “is to furnish new contributions to the History of our National Folk-Lore”.

That work never appeared, but its national focus was carried into the first Prospectus of the Folklore Society, in 1878, which hoped to publish “those scattered notes on the Popular Superstitions, Legends, and Ballads of Great Britain and Ireland, which are almost the only traces of the primitive mythology of these Islands”. You see there one dominant founding idea of our discipline, one that was subject to considerable theoretical examination throughout the period, namely that folklore constituted the survival of the primitive in the modern world.

We've moved away from that now, but we should note some of the political concerns behind it because they highlight another point about Thoms's neologism. Thoms invented the word,

but he did so in the context of a theoretical framework already being elaborated across Europe. The concept of primitive survivals offered the possibility of finding some underlying soul and culture of the people. It offered fuel to the notion of an inherent national character.

We're familiar with the darker side of this from 20th century history, but it looked somewhat different a century earlier. The appeal to an underlying national character could justify the aspiration for a nation where one did not yet exist. Bela Bartok, writing in 1932 of song collection in Hungary, summarised the situation brilliantly:

Anyone who is at all interested in folk song research has certainly heard that in small countries, especially those which have been more or less politically oppressed, have devoted themselves with exceptional eagerness to the collecting of their folk songs. It was the intention in these countries to invoke national feeling by disclosing and preserving the treasures hidden in the folk song and, to a certain extent, create a counterweight to oppression.

This was even more true of tales and epic poems, which not only offered a cultural treasure but also allowed for the construction of a national mythology for nations-in-waiting. The prime example is Elias Lönnrot's merging of oral texts into a national mythology in the *Kalevala*: this provided a cultural heritage for a Finland that was yet to be established. It achieved this, as celebration of a *Kalevala* day every 28th February attests.

Lönnrot and Thoms both sought inspiration in the articulation of these ideas over the previous 75 years, particularly in German-speaking regions. Ascendant German Romanticism from Herder onwards saw *Volk* as the basis of a Germany which was at that time still a cluster of divided federal states. We forget at our peril that big nations go through similar processes of formation and self-identification to small ones, particularly in their emergence.

This may well have been a factor in Thoms's failure to produce his *Folk-Lore of England*: the compulsion to produce a nationally identifying body of folklore was not so urgent in the senior part of a nation-state that already existed as in territory that *aspired* to national status. That is to say nothing of other attendant cultural groups that are less central to the existing nation's self-identity: think of the place of folklore in the Celtic Twilight, for example, or the regional language work of Joost Hiddes Halbertsma, whose 1871 novel *It Hekersshol* gave expression to the Friesian language whilst simultaneously relating a variety of folkloric beliefs and practices.

In existing powerful nation-states we may not find quite the same progressive striving for national expression as in the oppressed small territories Bartok spoke of, but we find something else. In its attention to the "primitive" and "savage" in the modern world, folklore was able to appeal in the imperial nations to the documentary tendencies of colonial administrators and their missionary associates. This is a complicated relationship. Some scholars found government posts that enabled them to pursue their research interests. Jaap Kunst, for example, who coined the word "ethnomusicology", had begun his researches

investigating traditional music in the Netherlands. Touring with a string trio he decided to stay on in the Dutch East Indies. He took a government post in Bandung which enabled him to pursue his important scholarly interests in Indonesian music.

Some colonial administrators became aware of folklore insofar as it impacted on other work they were already doing or had already done. Mansel Longworth Dames, for instance, passed the Indian Civil Service examination in 1868. He was posted to the Punjab in 1870, where he remained until his retirement in 1897. In February 1892 he wrote from his London address to the Folklore Society, a letter which was passed to the Publications Committee. Dames was not yet a member of the Society although he had written to the Secretary with the intention of joining, but, he wrote,

I now take the liberty of troubling you with some materials I have collected on the NW Frontier of India. I had not till lately paid much attention to Folklore, and the stories I took down in the Balochi language chiefly from a philological point of view, while completing a handbook of that language for the Punjab Government. As it is a language without a written literature it was necessary to collect my materials direct from the mouths of the people. The result is a collection of stories which have at any rate the merit of being recorded exactly in the words in which they were told...

He published these stories with the Folklore Society and the Royal Asiatic Society. He contributed to the Hakluyt Society, and was also a collector and scholar of North-West Indian Buddhist art and oriental coins, underscoring the slightly uneasy relationship between scholarship and colonial plunder. On his return to Britain he became a Council member of the Society where, his obituary noted, he gained “universal respect as an accomplished scholar”.

(The Society actually does not have much correspondence in its archives. Much of it was kept with personal papers or returned to correspondents. It is rare, as has recently happened, that someone approaches us because they find in family papers correspondence they know to be from early folklorists).

These international turns were reciprocated. One early champion of Lönnrot's *Old Kalevala* was Jakob Grimm, who lectured enthusiastically on it in 1845. Thoms, too, was looking to the Grimms. In that first letter he talked about the *Athenaeum* gathering collectanea “until some James Grimm shall arise who shall do for the Mythology of the British Islands the good service which that profound antiquary and philologist has accomplished for the Mythology of Germany”. Indeed, he went on, “The present century has scarcely produced a more remarkable book, imperfect as its learned author confesses it to be, than the second edition of the *Deutsche Mythologie*”. *Deutsche Mythologie*, wrote Thoms, was “a mass of minute facts, many of which, when separately considered, appear trifling and insignificant, - but, when taken in connection with the system into which his master-mind has woven them, assume a value that he who first recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them” [my emphasis].

That's important because, as he acknowledges, Thoms isn't just influenced by the words, he's influenced by the *ideas*. For all that Thoms explicitly acknowledged the importance of the Grimms in his thinking there and in 1872 correspondence in *Notes & Queries*, he did so with the intention of reasserting his claims of originality on the word. He was both pleased and flattered in 1855 that Dean Trench described the word "Folk-Lore" as "The most successful of these compounded words (*borrowed recently from the German*)". Thoms wrote that "The impression that the word was borrowed from the German is a very natural one" but emphasised again its "English origin". His nationally-defined ambitions had international precedent and context. In 1912, when Charlotte Burne announced a significant turn by the Folklore Society towards establishing "an authoritative *corpus* of British Folklore", she did so in a Presidential Address that sought to place that corpus in a European context.

So from the outset the Folklore Society saw itself in a broader context including the Grimms, the *Kalevala*, and other international analogues. Its first Prospectus, issued early in 1878, pledged to begin publication of the Society's Records. This would be the Society's Journal, which appeared as the *Folk-Lore Record* 1878-1882, and the *Folk-Lore Journal* 1883-1889 before becoming *Folk-Lore* in 1890, as it still is today. There is probably an article to be written about the place of the hyphen in the word "folklore". At the founding 1877 meeting "Folk Lore" was written as 2 words without a hyphen. That was also so in the handwritten minutes of the Society's first official meeting the following month. The first *publication* of the Society, however, the Prospectus considered in January 1878, announced it as "Folk-Lore" – 2 words *with* a hyphen. As the word became more familiar, thanks in part to the Society's activities, the hyphen was dropped and "folklore" became one word. In 1958 we finally and definitively dropped the hyphen from the Journal's title but confusingly retained it in the Society's name for another decade.

The 1878 Prospectus also stated hopes that "the commencement of a translation of Grimm's great work, 'Deutsche Mythologie', will be issued, as well as some illustrations of Aboriginal Folk-Lore, probably from the Japanese". As it turned out, plans for the Grimm translation became complicated almost immediately. Thoms, in a Preface to the first volume of *Folk-Lore Record*, explained that he was "probably mainly responsible for that suggestion, inasmuch as the book [had] long been an especial favourite of [his]". He noted that there had been recent objections to the book as being "as much, if not more, Scandinavian than Teutonic", although he felt this was not so great an objection as it remained "essentially the great storehouse of illustrations of the popular superstitions of these islands". He'd abandoned his intention, however, as a translation by another member of the Society was further advanced and better placed for publication.

The focus on the national was itself part of the formulation of theoretical systems that required international attention. The first issue of our journal featured some "Notes on Folk-Tales" which aimed to sketch a typological division of tales to understand their "origin and meaning". In it WRS Ralston, later President of the Society, looked at collections from Russia, Sicily, France, and Scotland among others. Alongside this, and items on English lore,

we find Andrew Lang on French folklore, Tylor on the Hidatsa Indians of Missouri, Coote on Italian folklore, and a piece on Japanese folktales.

The Society took seriously foreign material. In 1899 the Society gave a complementary dinner to Frederick Starr who was donating to it a large collection of (mainly Native American) artefacts. This sounds a charming evening. The whimsical menu gave dishes American-sounding names like “Potage à la Brer Tarrypin”, “New Potatoes à la Pocahontas”, and “Asparagus Popol Vuh”, while Kate Lee of the recently founded Folk Song Society (one of several societies inspired by the Folklore Society) sang songs she had just collected.

The Society was particularly enthusiastic where this foreign material could be incorporated in folklore theorising. In 1888 WF Kirby announced his intention of producing an English version of the *Kalevala* from a German translation. There was an outcry. (In 1891 the Journal, noting the scope of the Helsinki folklore archive, issued the plaintive comment “We must all learn Finnish”). Among the eminent scholars who insisted that Kirby’s undertaking would only be possible if he worked from the original Finnish were Andrew Lang and Max Müller. It is difficult to think of many other occasions on which those two ever agreed with each other. As instructive as the outcry is Kirby’s response. He learned Finnish and Estonian before tackling the task, and also translated the *Kalevipoeg* along the way.

Kirby’s rather forgotten now. His *Kalevala* translation is in Longfellow’s version of the metre, which doesn’t make it very readable today. He published only a few other comments on folklore in our Journal, but he was a dedicated Council member of the Society until his death in 1912, and an active participant in the Society’s meetings. Indeed, when the Society participated in *Kalevala* events after his death Kirby’s name was invariably mentioned as a champion of the subject in Britain.

His death went rather unmarked because he had the great misfortune to die in the same month as Andrew Lang. The Society honoured Lang with publication of four appreciations, two from outside Britain. Arnold van Gennep wrote

Détruire, en science tout au moins, c’est construire. En détruisant les théories de l’école linguistique, Lang a étendu la méthode ethnographique aux faits jusque là sacro-saints de l’antiquité classique et orientale; dans ce sens, l’effet des ouvrages de Lang est encore incomplet, et je sais quelques mythologues du Continent à qui leur lecture ferait beaucoup de bien.

A search through the Society’s pamphlet collection reveals the huge number of pamphlets sent to scholars like Lang from international admirers. In Lang’s case one suspects that what he gave the Society was what he had no space or time for during his life. With other scholars of his generation we have a more representative picture of exchange and interaction.

H.F. Feilberg, for example, sent many offprints to the Society. This accords with his role in establishing Danmarks Folkeminder, which he hoped would house his extensive ethnological library, but it also provides evidence of scholarly interaction. We have, for example, an

offprint of Axel Olrik's article "Märchen in Saxo Grammaticus", inscribed by Olrik to Feilberg. We have one offprint inscribed by Feilberg to the Society, but we have 12 inscribed to Marian Roalfe Cox (the closest the early Society came to producing a Scandinavian-style cataloguing taxonomist). On several of these Feilberg has written his own English version of the title: we have used these on the handlist of our pamphlet collection to be found on our website.

I would like to finish with an incident that speaks volumes about how the Folklore Society saw its international responsibilities and interactions. The 1889 International Congress in Paris concluded with a decision that these should be held every couple of years, with the next one in London. During its preparations the Executive Committee began assembling a list of possible members of an International Folklore Council, bringing together the big names in the field from across Europe.

Among proposed members was Edmund Veckenstedt, who had a year earlier been involved in the formation of a German folklore society and its publication *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*. Despite this advance for the discipline, doubts remained about Veckenstedt. In March 1891 E. Sidney Hartland, in a "Report on Folk-Tale Research" summarised the position in the Journal. In 1883 Veckenstedt had published "what purported to be a collection of folk-tales of the Zhamaite, a Lithuanian people on the shores of the Baltic ..." Henri Gaidoz had long hinted at "the real character of this collection", which finally erupted in articles in the French journal *Mélusine* in 1890.

A "severe article" on a later essay by Veckenstedt provoked an abusive response from him. In reply definite charges were laid by M.J. Carlowicz. Carlowicz accused Veckenstedt of ignorance of the languages he purported to be reporting; of mistaken philologies; of inventing Zhamaite deities, more often than not taken from a 16th century satire on Catholic superstition; of reproducing an earlier collection of Wendish myths as if they were Zhamaite; and of having been party to his own deception by setting students impossible field collecting targets, thus encouraging them to invent texts to meet his demands.

This was obviously painful. Hartland reports summarising the charges as faithfully as possible while avoiding "the philological details ... and ... the tone of sarcasm employed by M. Carlowicz". Veckenstedt's "reply" to *Mélusine* was evasive and no defence. Hartland goes to the point of why this matters:

Folk-lore is a science dealing with phenomena, the evidence of which – especially in the department of Folk-tales – is more liable to distortion, conscious or unconscious, and presents greater opportunities for imposture, especially in this age of literary activity on every side, than many others. It is, therefore, of supreme importance to ensure the good faith, the competence, and the accuracy of collectors; for on these depend the entire conclusions of the science.

Unless answered, Hartland warned, the charges "will stiffen into certainties, which will not only overwhelm Dr Veckenstedt, but (*a much greater thing*) be in danger of throwing discredit

upon the science of folk-lore itself" [my emphasis].

A letter drafted to Veckenstedt in May by an emergency meeting of the Congress Executive Committee noted that refutation of the charges was important "in the interests both of the science of folklore & of the approaching Congress if not in your own interest". A meeting of that Committee in June found Veckenstedt's reply "unsatisfactory" and voted to remove him from the Congress's Comité de Patronage. There was clearly anxiety about such a strong letter, and a meeting in July heard a report that the letter had been divided into two. The Committee expressed its disapproval, and again voted to send him the strongest possible letter.

Veckenstedt's response was not satisfactory to the Committee, which removed him from the Comité (although he appears to have claimed publicly to be a leading member of it). His initial paper defence, submitted to the Journal, was also deemed unsatisfactory and returned for further details. This was put in type in German, and proofs were sent in early October. Veckenstedt didn't reply, delaying publication of the Journal. At the end of November, when pressed by letter to return proofs, Veckenstedt "absolutely refused permission to publish the defence" on the grounds that he'd planned to present it to the Congress. It's worth quoting the Journal's published "Explanation" of this matter at the end of the year:

Dr Veckenstedt may possibly be acting in his own best interest in thus arbitrarily withdrawing his defence ... But we desire to put on record that the pages of this review have been duly thrown open to a defence to charges made in it, and that after that favour had been accepted at the hands of the incriminated party, it was ungraciously refused at the last and most inconvenient moment. Every folk-lorist will be easily able to put his own construction on Dr Veckenstedt's action.

I want to conclude with this rather thrilling case of academic fraud and unpleasantness not just because it's exciting, but because it highlights the interactions the Society had internationally. They looked to Veckenstedt as an international authority. They took seriously the work of international scholars like Gaidoz and Carlowicz who launched rigorous critiques in esteemed foreign journals like *Mélusine*. They engaged thoughtfully and sensitively with an attempt to clarify theoretical and practical matters, and they moved to distance themselves from what they saw as something shady and underhand. They did all this with attention not just to a scholar's personal reputation, but above all with concern for the future of the discipline itself. It is, actually, rather inspiring.