

## Folk Narrative

Stanley Robertson: This is a culture that bonds [...] There's so much beauty on the earth if we look for it.<sup>i</sup>

Folk narrative, to appropriate Hodgart on ballad, is 'as hard to define' as 'easy to recognise'.<sup>ii</sup> Many would assume it is primarily oral in character, however it cannot be isolated from the literary, whether at point of origin, or the point of capture/collection. Perhaps 'Folk narrative' could be understood as any narrative 'belonging' to people in Scotland, in whatever folk group they show allegiance to at a particular time (national, regional, ethnic, family, gender, religiously or occupationally-based, after Elliot Oring).<sup>iii</sup> Maybe a sense of possession, by teller and audience, is more marked with folk narrative than with literary texts. Then there are the related issues of language choices (including English, Scots or Gaelic) and transcription (as it affects reception) along with interrelationships with folk drama,<sup>iv</sup> custom and song. Here, however, I consider folk narrative in four ways—as collected item, performed text, generically-related, and as subject for analysis. Its chameleon nature

makes this one of the most rewarding narrative forms to explore, for performers, audiences, collectors or students.

Scotland has a long and distinguished record of collecting folk narratives in manuscript and recorded forms (for private or archival use); printed anthologies and within biographical or place-based materials. Martin Martin's pioneering *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, of c.1695, for instance, includes a wealth of information, from a Gaelic speaker, about the narrative traditions of this area. Similarly, James Macpherson's Ossianic collections, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Temora* (1761/2) and *Fingal* (1765) contain core narratives from the Gaeltachd, seen through the lens of imaginative reconstruction. Robert Chambers' *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826) and *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes* (1832) are groundbreaking. Hugh Miller's *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835) is well worth mentioning in this context too, along with J.F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860-1862). Similarly, Andrew Lang's colour-themed *Fairy Books*, later published as a set of 12 volumes, includes a great deal of significant Scottish material. As a survey of the historical development of collection in Scotland, Donald Smith's *Storytelling Scotland* (2001) is an excellent introduction; Richard Dorson's *The British Folklorists* (1968) also

contains useful survey material in his fourth chapter on ‘The First Scottish Folklorists’ Walter Scott and Allan Cunningham. Strangely, though, Dorson neglects earlier narrative collectors, like Allan Ramsay (1686-1758), whose *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1723) and *Ever-green* (1724), for instance, are important sources on Scottish verse traditions.<sup>v</sup>

In terms of concerted national collecting, the 1951 foundation of Edinburgh University’s School of Scottish Studies (now part of Celtic and Scottish Studies) has played a substantial and continuing role, from the pioneering work of Hamish Henderson and Calum Maclean onwards (the latter particularly with Gaelic material) on to Alan Bruford, John Shaw and others. In terms of *diaspora* traditions, too—again, too sizeable a topic to consider in any depth here—there is a long tradition of collecting, too, for instance that of Helen Creighton in Nova Scotia or that represented by the Western Australian Folklore Archive.<sup>vi</sup> Recently, the Scottish Storytelling Centre has become a forum for the transmission, and enjoyment, of orally-performed texts; the Scottish Storytelling Festival, first held in 1989 in Edinburgh, has become a crucial arena for the promulgation of the art form.

Recently, a wide range of material has become available on-line, often with useful, contextual support materials. For instance, *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches* offers free access to 26 000 oral recordings made in Scotland, from the 1930s onwards. Its predecessor, the *Pearl* website, offers access both to archived folk narratives in Gaelic, Scots and English, and also to those already published in the journal *Tocher*; again, this is a highly useful resource.

Regionally focussed sites which include manuscript and printed forms of folk narrative include *Am Baile. Highland History and Culture* and *NEFA* (The North East Folklore Archive). The *SCRAN* website is another rich access point, with, including sound and video recordings of storytellers.<sup>vii</sup>

To understand folk narrative, both as a form and in specific instances, contextual information is crucial. Stories cannot be separated from their tellers, or creators, whether individuals or community—the transmission process makes them, in effect, joint efforts. As a form, it is far more adaptive than the fixed literary text; manner of delivery, for instance, can sometimes (if not always) vary in response to storyteller or audience demands, needs or preferences. Each occasion generates a different experience and the storyteller's art depends on understanding of this process. To take an example, a story told in an intimate family setting will be delivered, and received, in a

context-driven way (it allows, for instance, for the storyteller to explain resonances to children as the story continues); the same tale retold in a festival, or printed in a book, will lose much of its intimacy although, arguably, it may gain from a more theatrical framing.

Performance contexts have certainly changed dramatically over the past millenium, as interactions between the oral and print (from chapbooks, and literary retellings of folk narratives to film and television contexts) have widened and deepened. From the purpose-specific website (too many to list), to the tweeted joke, circulation can be instant and (arguably) superficial. The proliferation of local clubs and storytelling circles (the Grampian Association of Storytellers, [www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk](http://www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk) , for instance, whose website has a section of useful links) again, establishes a new context for transmission. The Scottish Storytelling Centre website [www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk) includes a register of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, places of residence, and interests, also providing resources, education, and advocacy for the art form, as a relevant activity for all age groups and needs.

Well known storytellers of the past could, perhaps, be traced back to the Gaelic heritage of the legendary Ossian (3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century). Publicly commended individuals include James Hogg's grandfather, Will o' Phaup, allegedly the last man to see the fairies in Scotland, and certainly benefitting from his grandson's ability to highlight his skills. The collecting work outlined above has highlighted the incomparable work of, in particular, traveller storytellers, from Jeannie Robertson and her family, including her nephew, the late and peerless Stanley, to Alexander Stewart of Lairg, the Williamsons (particularly the great Duncan Williamson), Betsy Whyte of Montrose, Sheila Stewart of Blairgowrie and others too numerous to mention here. The School of Scottish and Celtic Studies' journal *Tocher* is a great resource in this respect and recently, too, there has been a flourishing of recognition for storytelling skills, documented and celebrated, as I have considered elsewhere.<sup>viii</sup>

Performers today represent a diversity of style, and background, as storytellers—from the relatively unbroken traditions found among the travellers, for instance, to the street and theatrical traditions found elsewhere. Performance style, of course, is as individual as the performers—some are quiet, understated and spellbinding; others flamboyant, dramatic and overtly impressive. Some tell stories in the formal context of festivals, or theatres;

others at intimate gatherings of friends and family; some in the applied setting of educational or therapeutic contexts, or in guiding the tourist. All these factors affect the reception, and understanding, of folk narrative.

Broadly speaking, folk narratives are usually grouped into ‘minor’ (proverbs, riddles, sayings, anecdotes, jokes) and ‘major’ genres (anecdotes, tall tales, folk drama, legends and myths, märchen, and oral histories). There are summaries of their characteristics in classic studies like Stith Thomson’s *The Folktale* (1946) and Linda Dégh’s essay on ‘Folk in Richard Dorson’s *Folklore and Folk Life* (1972). In terms of the minor genres, Archer Taylor’s *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (1951) and *The Proverb* (1931), along with his edition of the 1663 *A collection of Scotch Proverbs*. Pappity Stoury is worth consulting.<sup>ix</sup>

Major genres covers anecdotes, including tall tales; animal tales (Scotland holding a distinguished record in fables through, for instance, Henryson);<sup>x</sup> tales of local worthies and, most recently, the ‘chat show’ anecdote, employing its own distinctive idioms. Then there is legend, whose main characteristic is often referred to as verisimilitude—these are stories are told as if they are true, with details (dates, names, places) to validate this (told like it is true). Categories

within include the historical (legends about the past) and *aetiological* (origin), as well as the contemporary legend—the urban ‘myths’, often circulated in print and internet media. Jan Harold Brunvand categorises a series of these from the ‘Phantom Hitchhiker’ (in Shetland the Witch of Unst) to ‘the Hook’; in a Scottish context, the work of Sandy Hobbs is also important, along with insights in the *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* series (1984-90).<sup>xi</sup>

Contemporary legends are often said to express social fears, for instance about the vulnerability of the young (particularly women).

Probably the best known and certainly the most studied of the major genres is *märchen* (a technical term adapted from the 1812 *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, the first storybook published for scholarly purposes) is also known as wonder, or fairy tales, although they do not always feature fairies. The *märchen* is an adventure tale: coming from humble beginnings, the hero/ine endures a series of challenges (supernatural and natural) which s/he meets, often in opposition to the older and supposedly wiser siblings who precede him/her on their journey winning, by the end, a throne and a wealthy, attractive partner: this, it is implied, is his/her just deserts for being pure at heart, even if simple in demeanour.



In terms of analytical techniques, folk narrative offers many possibilities. Particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, there was an attempt, for instance, to classify their national and international dimensions, often for political ends. The Grimms said tales with close resemblances, found worldwide, were part of an Indo-European tradition, rooted in antiquity. This premise informs the two major reference collections for tales: Aanti Aarne and Stith Thomson's *The Types of the Folktale* (1964) and Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of folk-literature* (1955-58).<sup>xii</sup> These set the standard reference points for cultural comparisons and many collections look at regional and national traditions in this way.

Folk narratives are generally seen, too, to be non-linear in structure: events are ranked by importance, rather than when they chronologically happened. They have been presented, from the early twentieth century onwards, as structurally predictable, as indicated in Vladimir Propp's influential *Morphology of the Folktale*. Equally, they have been seen as psychologically revealing, from Freud's study of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, to Jung on *Dream* narratives, to the more recent work of Alan Dundes. Equally, they have been seen as socially relevant and gender-significant (Marina Warner)<sup>xiii</sup> by a variety of critics, academic and otherwise. They have been

seen as quasi-political too: defining a nation or, at the micro-level, a region, from Ernest Marwick's *The folklore of Orkney and Shetland* Alan Temperley's *Tales of Galloway*.<sup>xiv</sup>

In conclusion, folk narrative can be approached in a variety of ways: through collection and archival (physical or virtual), as performed text or as representative of a genre. It has classifiable characteristics—more useful for taxonomy, perhaps, than for understanding—but it is, above all, linked to context. It is fluid, and it is powerful; conscious of the fact that most of the critics I have cited here have been from furth of Scotland, it is equally deserving of concerted, critical and persistent interrogation as a form.

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<sup>i</sup> Qtd from Valentina Bold and Thomas A. McKean, eds, *Northern Folk: Living Traditions of North East Scotland* (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, 1999): 'Gallery'.

<sup>ii</sup> M.J.C. Hodgart *The Ballad* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London: Hutchison's University Library, 1969), p.10.

<sup>iii</sup> Elliot Oring *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986).

<sup>iv</sup> See, for instance, Brian Hayward *Galoshins: The Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

<sup>v</sup> See Martin Martin *Description of the Occidental, i.e. Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn 1999); *Poems of Ossian and Related Works* ed Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1996). Robert Chambers *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Hunter, 1826); *Scottish Jest and Anecdotes* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838); Hugh Miller *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* ed James Robertson (Edinburgh: B & W Publishing, 1994); J.F. Campbell *Popular Tales of The West Highlands*, facsimile of 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Hounslow, Middlesex: Wildwood House, 1982); *The Fairy Books of Andrew Lang* ed David Widger (Amazon: Kindle edition). See too Donald Smith *Storytelling Scotland. A Nation in Narrative* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001); Richard Dorson *The British Folklorists. A History* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968). See Allan Ramsay *Tea-Table Miscellany* (Edinburgh: Ruddiman, 1723) and *Ever-green* 2 vols (Edinburgh: Ruddiman, 1724), for

<sup>vi</sup> See, for instance, Helen Creighton *Bluenose Ghosts* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1959) and *A folk tale journey through the maritimes* ed Michael Taft and Ronald Caplan (Wreck Cove, Cape Breton Island, NS: Breton Books, 1993); see <http://john.curtin.edu.au/folklore/> and Graham Seal *Great Australian Stories. Legends, Yarns and Tall Tales* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/>; <http://www.pearl.arts.ed.ac.uk/>; <http://www.ambaile.org.uk/>; <http://www.nefa.net/>; <http://www.scran.ac.uk>.

<sup>viii</sup> See Valentina Bold, 'Twenty-first-century storytelling: context, performance, renaissance', in Bethold Schoene, ed, *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.371-79.

<sup>ix</sup> Stith Thomson *The Folktale* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Berkeley: University of California, 1977); Richard Dorson *Folklore and Folk Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Archer Taylor *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); Archer Taylor *The Proverb* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931); Archer Taylor, ed *A Collection of Scotch Proverbs (1663) Pappity Stampoy* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1955)

<sup>x</sup> See Robert Henryson *The Poems of Robert Henryson* selected Charles Elliot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

<sup>xi</sup> See, for instance, Jan Harold Brunvand *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) and Paul Smith and Gillian Bennett *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* 5 vols (Sheffield: Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1984-1990).

<sup>xii</sup> Aanti Aarne and Stith Thomson *The Types of the Folktale: a classification and bibliography* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1964) Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of folk-literature: a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books and local legends* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-58).

<sup>xiii</sup> Vladimir Propp *Morphology of the Folktale* rev Louis A. Wagner, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Sigmund Freud *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* ed James Strachey (New York: Norton 1989); Carl Gustav Jung *Dreams* translated by R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 2002); see, for instance, Alan Dundes *From game to war and other psychoanalytical essays on folklore* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1997) and Marina Warner *From the beast to the blonde: on fairy tales and their tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).

<sup>xiv</sup> Ernest W. Marwick *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* first pub 1975 (Edinburgh: Birlinn 2011); Alan Temperley *Tales of Galloway* first pub 1979 (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1986).