

## Traditionalizing in Scotland

*Degh, Linda*

In my effort to understand the maintenance of the layer of cultural tradition we identify as folklore, I continue to look at creative individuals who consciously adhere to, and reformulate the expressive forms of their legacy in order to keep them relevant to others in their peer group. Tradition always was and still is the natural base upon which innovations can be set forth. New technologies of today may change the relationship and the proportions of the give and-take between the two, while the conflicting worldviews of old and new remain similar dynamic forces of revision, as people keep appealing for both conservative and modern values. It seems the nostalgic idealized recasting of tradition is a necessary platform to slow down the speed and cushion the blow of rapid change and gain time to prepare for what is in the making: a homogenized global technocracy run by institutionalized accommodators of work, leisure, health ideology and welfare. In this, a mechanized mass society is projected, isolating and alienating human beings from each other by turning them into space aliens vegetating on separate self-contained planets, building their own imaginary world, and constructing a virtual global village by internet communication. But have no fear. We have not reached that stage yet. Perhaps the juvenile computer geniuses who force us to learn new skills and keep buying new machines to perfect our individualization will resort to other games satisfying their lust for power that money can buy. We are familiar with this lust; it has been the driving force of folktale protagonists with ego-trip motivation, such as Jack, the simpleton orphan boy who outwits everyone in power so that he can acquire their dominance. We indeed empathize with the Dragonslayer (AT 300) who prioritizes personal interest over the welfare of the *Gemeinschaft*.

But forces of modernity cannot eliminate forces of antiquity concerned with the safeguarding and celebration of community that endows individuals with secure values, assigning them a place in the hierarchy of family, clan, lineage, village, region, ethnic and national group. Individuals, thus, appear as creative entities, bearing the cultural and political traditions that give them a sense of pride

of their community-defined identity. The fear of losing identity is symptomatic of cataclysmic changes anywhere in the world. Yet it is particularly painful for Europeans who have been, over a period beginning with the end of World War II, continually exposed to a new technology of communication tending toward intercultural globalization, threatening distinctiveness, coupled with an aggressive and violent ethno-political rearrangement of national boundaries. Fortunately or unfortunately, folklore keeps its attraction as commodity to politicians and salespeople - keeping it relevant and blossoming in the modern world while causing uncertainties among folklorists concerning its academic worth (Bendix 1998, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

How can we forge a folkloristic approach to folklore in this situation? How can we identify the voice of folklore, separate from folklorism in its current configurations, manipulated, objectified, sold and imposed by so many insider-outsider interest groups and brokerages, revivalists, populists, politicians and merchants? It would be hard but not impossible if we followed the historical process of the uses and interpretations of folklore by the folk, by other users and by schools of folkloristics. Those who are familiar with the history of our discipline know that its subject, folklore, evolves and keeps being shaped by epochal *Zeitgeists*, running its course in cycles before progressing to the next stage that repeats the same relationships adapted to new socio-economic constellations. We should know that the confusion is not bigger than it ever was, it's only seems so because the planet is more populated.

But instead of surveying the historic process, a simpler strategy could be suggested: an exploration of the current status of folklore from the viewpoint of its bearers, active performers and their audiences. How does the folk define folklore, its content, and its nature? In this brief essay I will present the views of a bearer of one of the wealthiest narrative traditions in Europe, reporting my conversation with Essie Stewart during my 1998 summer fieldwork in Scotland. Historically, folklorists have not been very much concerned about the ways bearers relate to their traditions.

Scotland has the longest history of collecting and studying folklore among oppressed nations with an "inferiority complex" (Dundes, 1985). James Macpherson published ancient epic poems that he attributed to an early Gaelic bard, Ossian, were in fact constructed by Macpherson himself from contemporary oral and manuscript collections (Macpherson 1760). This work set an example for European nationalists fighting for the independence of their homeland. Along with



The pub in Edinburgh, where stories are told, songs are sung with whiskey and beer –  
Hamish Anderson folklore scholar

Macpherson's "new Homer," Bishop Percy's compilation of ballads as reliques of ancient poetry (Percy 1765) convinced leading European intellectuals that indigenous oral poetry in vernacular languages are effective weapons to achieve recognition. The message spread like foxfire with reference to the Scottish example. From the 1780s to the end of the nineteenth century, appeals in literary magazines urged patriots to collect the poetry of the folk, which was the only preserver of national values (Cocchiara 1954, Dundes 1985). The result was overwhelming and led to the establishment of national archives and museums (living outdoor folk museums as well) for documentation and preservation. Folklore societies were founded for scholarly exchange and public education. University chairs were instituted to secure continuity and a dignified place for folklore among the humanistic sciences. Remarkably, an internationally coordinated nationalistic science was born that was as much self-contained and independently developed in each of the adherent countries, as it was inspired by the same spirit of European populism. Evidently, folklore, the subject of the discipline is also paradoxically national as much as it is international. The most celebrated classical forms of national folklore: Märchen, legend, ballad, song, turned out to be internationally widespread, causing unhappiness among patriotically driven scholars (Ortutay 1972, 98-108) and national politicians.

Elements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century myth of national ownership of folklore in unique formulations necessarily lingers on in expressions of cultural identity consciousness. In a recent article James Porter cautions Scottish

folklorists against the object-oriented displays of cultural identity “as a reified, idealised view of the past” (Porter 1998,10), but the magnitude of the problem lies in the fact that the idealized third century Scots identity that was “invented” in the eighteenth century continued, and was imposed and expanded (Trevor-Roper 1983) by the arbitrators: the gullible, romantic folk, the folklorist and the public. In other words, true or fiction, genuinely believed or deliberately forged, the process of folklorization combines and accommodates innumerable disparate elements resulting in folklore that is endemic, subjectively claimed and identified by its bearers. In Scotland, the self-image of modern folk artists who combine the art of tale and legend-telling, ballad singing and bagpipe playing traditionalizes and acts out the invented identity features. This bothers historians, but does it really matter to the folklorists that the image is constructed? Shouldn't folklorist be more interested in the artistic, subjective, emotionally charged true facts behind the contemporary forms of traditional art that continues the societies need for them? No doubt, part of the repertoire of the currently performing artists are of literary origin, chronicling a semi-fictional prehistoric and medieval Gaelic past. Some of the narrators specialize in old epic poetry and reject the international *märchen* themes as alien. Some want to be loyal to ancestral tradition as they know it, write and recite their own patrimonial geneologies, and trace their Highland origin, other narrators wear tartan and Celtic badges. Others rewrite their own traditional oral narratives and autobiographical experiences in a literary style seasoned with expressions and cadences of elite literature.

Storytelling, poetry recital, ballad and song singing, instrumental music playing and dancing are all parts of Scottish social life at the ‘*ceilidh*’, which is an evening gathering of family, friends and neighbours. As the stranger is informed, this tradition and entertainment was a part of the original distinctly Celtic Highland culture. According to informants, its narrative body from the Western Highlands, represented by the classic collection of J. F. Campbell of Islay (Campbell 1860/62) has been preserved, carried on and further disseminated by the clan of itinerant tinsmiths, basket makers and artisans known as the Travelling People. In brief, they are the “tinkers, hawkers and horse-dealers who, for centuries, have passed through ..villages buying, selling and entertaining. These Scottish nomads... are indigenous, Gaelic speaking Scots who, to this day, remain heirs of a vital and ancient culture of great historic and artistic importance to Scotland...” (Neat, 1996). In the 1950s, folklorist Hamish Henderson discovered the travellers and did a tremendous service to scholarship as well as contributed to the popularization of Scottish oral tradition by tape-recording the expressive

art of this non-literate group. One of his outstanding storytellers was Alexander of the widespread Stewart clan, (the Stewarts of Remarstaig) a blind man known as Ailidh Dall (born 1882). "It was the cream of my life, the top of my life - writes Henderson, - those two months up there with the Stewarts, a four-wheel drive and a ridge-pole tent, out on the road three families strong, with horses, carts, with barefoot children and an old man telling Homeric, Ossianic tales"(Neat 73).

Essie was fourteen at that time, living with her mother and her grandfather. She was raised by the traveller culture, spending 5-6 months on the road, sharing the strong family orientation and philosophy of a selfless, godfearing, but carefree, easygoing and fun-loving life. She had heard her grandfather's stories since early childhood, but when she got married at seventeen to a travelling pearl fisherman who was twenty-nine, her responsibilities changed. She learned how to fish for pearls, and in time became an expert at selling them. But the marriage went sour after four children were born and Essie left her husband for a younger man. She was later employed in hospital administration and retired in due course as her children completed their education, an accomplishment that she herself could never afford. Her daughters are now professionals, and married with children. Essie leads a comfortable life and helps her daughters her grandchildren. In heart, she remains a traveller, cherishing the memory of her grandfather, her mother and the extended family that endowed her with the superior morality inherent in the tales they were telling. At fifty-seven, Essie realizes what she had missed by staying a passive recipient, not an active reciter of tales like her grandfather, passing on the legacy of their ancestors. Now that she has the time, Essie decided to listen to the audiotapes of Ailidh Dall deposited at the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. Committed to her cultural heritage, she hopes that the voice of the past will bring back her childhood memories of narration in the traveller's tent and enable herself to recapture the ancestral tales, and transmit them to her grandchildren. Talking about her life to folklorists at the School indeed began to shed light on forgotten stories<sup>1</sup>, and she was eager to talk to me, allow me to ask questions to trigger her recall. We set up two occasions at the School for informal conversations yielding six supernatural family legends among others<sup>2</sup>. I was deeply impressed by Essie's attrac-

---

<sup>1</sup> I owe thanks to John Shaw and Barbara McDermitt from the School of Scottish Studies, helping us to make contact with key narrators. Their generosity is surpassed only by that of our informant's who treated us like old friends and taught us new knowledge we never would have learned without them.

<sup>2</sup> Our fieldwork team of folklorists from the Indiana University Folklore Institute included myself and my colleague Gregory Schrempp, and graduate students Julie Heath and Andrew Hyman.



Duncan Williamson, the most prominent storyteller, balladsinger among the Scottish travellers. Balmullo, Scotland, 1998

itive personality. She looked like a professional woman, dressed in a blue suit with simple elegance in good taste, and a sweet smile on her face. She had poise indeed, making us, her audience feel comfortable starting a conversation. She answered our questions thoughtfully, with feeling, consideration, and a good sense of humor, but also with dignity. She often apologized for not having a good education yet her conduct revealed sharp intelligence and knowledge. Her conversational language was engaging. She seemed to be comfortable with talking to us, calling us by our first names, like old friends when explaining something we were asking about. Then, breaking into performance, her narrative style became dramatic, rhythmic with incremental repetitions, similar to that of seasoned narrators. Her interest in re-learning the forgotten stories is clearly a conscious effort to boost her Scottish-Gaelic traveller identity, an expression of loyalty to ancestral values. Essie, the passive listening member of this storytelling subculture is motivated by the same ideal as the active traveller storytellers I have met. For example, Duncan Williamson, who estimates his tale repertoire as large as "a couple of thousands of stories," stated to me that he is a collector. Each tale he knows, some in several versions, originated from the great narrators of the past, and he collected them from older relatives and friends.<sup>3</sup> His only contribution was to reshape the stories to make their meaning more accessible to his audiences. At seventy, Duncan has three audiences to entertain. The primary and natural is that of his own folks at the natural gatherings of travellers, and secondary is that of the staged and organized international festivals where he plays a paid starring role as a professional performer, and learns new stories from Japanese, Israeli, African, etc. narrators. Duncan's third audience is schoolchildren getting an education in the wisdom and moral values of ancestral tales. Both Essie and Duncan were raised by nonliterate storytellers but educated in a changing world they left behind the confines of their subculture. Yet, both of them feel obligation to their elders, whose principles of conduct are manifest in folktales. It is for the next generation

<sup>3</sup> We have paid a visit to Duncan Williamson at his home in Balmullo, Fife, July 16.

to continue and keep identity preserved. Here is one of Essie's stories that she remembered during our conversation about supernatural encounters: This is a classical legend superbly told with all important ingredients, expressing her own certainties. She respects and trusts those who had told it to her, but since they had passed away long ago, there is no way to ask them for confirmation.

### The evil eye

"...there is a little story that perhaps you would be interested hearing, Linda. And that happened to my granduncle. My mother's ... my granny's brother. And he was a baby. And he died in 1957, aged 65. And this happened when he was six months old. And this was ... and this is the evil eye I'm talking about.

And they were round by... round by Eastern ... Western Ross, somewhere ... I'm not terribly sure where. You know, on the rounds, during the summer, and my great-granny was going around. Selling her tin. It was mostly tin that they had in those days because they were excellent tin smiths. This is my great-granny on my mother's side. I'm talking about OI' Granny Williamson.

And it was a Saturday, and her last port of call was at a shop. She knew the people of course, everybody she knew, everybody, and everybody knew her. And the shop, the house on the shop, they were attached. The shop was just a little building that was attached to the main house. But there was an adjoining door. She went into the shop, and the lady at the shop was busy. And she says: 'Kate', she says, 'Just go through, have a seat, and I'll be through when I finished serving these people.'

And she was carrying this six month old child in her lap, and she also had a little one, trotting along at her side. So she went through the door, and she went into the living room or the kitchen, whatever. There was this woman, sitting at the fireside whom she recognized, but didn't really know well. So they chatted away for awhile. And this woman turned ... turned to Kate Williamson. And she turned to her: 'Well, Kate,' she says, 'what is the three most beautiful things you've ever seen in your life?' And she says: 'To be perfectly honest,' she says, 'I wasna paying much attention', to what she was seeing. And well, she turned toward her: 'Well', she says, 'I don't know, and to be quite honest,' she said, 'I do not know what where the three most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life. I haven't really thought about it.' 'Well', she says, 'I'll tell you of the three most beautiful things that I have ever seen in my life. And that is', she says, 'that's a pregnant woman, a boat under sail, and a mare in foal'. And the shopkeeper overheard, and

she came through the adjoining door: 'O', she said, 'be quiet', she said, 'stop that nonsense.'

However, there was no more said, and she had, Kate Williamson had forgotten about it. Bought her tea, bought her groceries, and went home. By the time she got home, the baby started crying. And the baby cried all night. That was Saturday night, remember, all Sunday, all Sunday night until the early hours of Sunday morning. At six o'clock on Sunday morning, she couldn't take it anymore. She got up, she got dressed, even if she wasn't in bed at all, I wasn't very sure. And she took ... she dressed the eldest boy. He was about ... eight... seven-eight, and she settled, on her rounds, and she had quite a way to walk. By the time she got to the first houses, they have just begun to light the fires. And she knocked on the first door she came to. And the lady came out, and. . . 'O my goodness', she said, 'what's wrong with your baby?' And she said: 'I don't know Missus,' she says, 'I can't, I don't know what ... who did this destruction.'

'Just come in.' So she ... went in. And she took one of her tin buckets she was selling. She handed it to the older boy and she said to him: 'You get the bucket and go to the well, 'she says, 'and fill it up to a quarter. And when you fill it up to a quarter,' she says, 'take a two shilling piece.' (In those days... it is an equivalent to two pences, nowadays. . .)' Just put it into the water, in the bucket. Bring it back here', she says, 'it does not matter whom you see, whom you meet, don't talk to them.'

So the child did it as he was told, and he brought back the water. She put it in a pan and she put it on the side of the fire to heat. When the water was sufficiently warm, she put it into the bath and got her ring, her gold wedding ring, her gold band, and she put it in the bath water. By then she had undressed the child and she started bathing him. By the time she had finished ... even before she had finished bathing him, she was jumping. All the while she was bathing the baby, she was jumping. But Kate Williamson couldna move, She had no idea, she wasna clear what she was seeing... what was going on. Like she was like... talking in tongues. Before she had even finished bathing the baby, the child had fallen asleep. So she dressed him, and she wrapped him in her shawl, and she handed him back to his mother. She made her tea, and. . . 'Kate', she said, 'over the last few days', she said, 'have you been talking to anybody... anybody, a stranger? Has anybody said anything strange to you?' She said, 'I can only remember the woman wearing a shawl in the shop.' 'O yes!' And she mentioned, you know, that she had been in the shop of Missus So-and-So, and this person had been in the shop, 'and I might



have known. . . And she said: 'She cursed your baby, 'she said, ' she cursed your child.' She said: 'another hour and your child was dead,' she said, 'I could have warned you'. Well, well... she is evil...

Maybe it is a bit far fetched, you know, but, you know, if someone had told me, perhaps I would not have believed it. But I mean, it has not been told to someone. But harm have been done, it happened to my great-granny, it happened to my granduncle, and I have no reason whatsoever to disbelieve them.



Essie Stewart tells the Evil Eye story of her grand-aunt at my office at the school of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1998

Finishing her story with her statement of belief Essie responded to our questions:

- Does she know what the evil woman's words meant?
- No. Not as far as I know. It was ... I mean it's a long time ago, you know, and the people involved are dead, you know ... Even my mother. And there's no one I can ask about it, you know. I told you the story the way it was told to me, and the way I heard it, you know.
- Was she a witch?
- Obviously she had the power, she had a power of some kind, you know. They called it the evil eye, you know. So I mean, she must have had some power when she had the child, you know, Another hour, and the baby would have been dead. Ahm. And here again, she had the power to put the curse on the child and the other lady had the power to take the curse off, you know, so it works both ways. You know, I mean, one was bad, and... one was evil, and one was good.

- Julie: Was it unusual to have good power?  
 – Julie, I think it was quite prevalent, you know. I really think it was quite... yeah, yeh. You know, there was good and bad I mean, but we don't hear about it nowadays. Maybe it exists, I'm sure it does, but we don't hear about it.

## Bibliography

- Bendix, Regina. 1997. "Of Names, Professional Identities, and Disciplinary Futures," *Journal of American Folklore* 111, 235-246
- Campbell, John Francis. 1860-62. *Popular Tales of the Western Highlands*. 4 vols. Edinburgh  
 Cocchiara, Giuseppe. 1954. *Storia del folklore in Europa*. Einaudi: Torino
- Dundes, Alan. 1985. "National Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the Kinder- and Hausmärchen, the Kalevala and Paul Bunyan." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 22:5-18
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, 1998. "Folklore's Crisis" *Journal of American Folklore* 111:281-327
- Macpherson, James. 1760. *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*.
- Neat, Timothy. 1996. *The Summer Walkers. Travelling People and Pearl-Fishers in the Highlands of Scotland*. Canongate Books, Edinburgh
- Ortutay, Gyula 1972. "Between East and West," in: *Hungarian Folklore: Essays*. Akademiai Kiadó, Budapest 76-97
- Percy, Thomas. 1765. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.
- Porter, James. 1998. "The Folklore of Northern Scotland: Five Discourses on Cultural Representation," *Folklore* 109:1-14
- Trevor-Roper, Hugh. 1983. "The Invention of Tradition: A Highland Tradition of Scotland," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 15-42.