

Folklore and the Liberal Arts

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Abstract:

If the etymology of “Liberal” is a legitimate starting point for reflection on the original direction and intention of a Liberal Arts education – studies fit for a free citizen and not a slave – we may be well served to look at parallel terms as starting points for a reconceiving the Liberal Arts as we shift from a classicist to a modern and postmodern mindset, and from an exclusive to an inclusive worldview. The discipline of Folklore has as its field of inquiry informal expressive culture, with an emphasis on the tacit, the informal, the quotidian, the interstitial, the local, and the marginalized. Within recent Folklore scholarship the use of the term “Vernacular,” from *vernaculus*, a slave born within a master’s household, has emerged as a useful entry into spheres ranging from architecture (Glassie 2000) to religious studies (Primiano 1995), song (Narváez 1995), and theory (Baker 1984). This paper suggests how Folklore not only can (and does) contribute to the Liberal Arts curriculum as traditionally conceived but also provides a theoretical framework for how the Liberal Arts can address and adapt to the shifting expectations of cultural literacy and global citizenship in a post-Colonial, de-centered world.

Biography:

Ian Brodie is an Assistant Professor of Folklore at Cape Breton University. Currently serving as Past-President of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, his research interests include the occupational folklife of Canadian Immigration Foreign Service officers, the relationship between stand-up comedy and vernacular modes of speech, the tradition of painting a trestle bridge among industrial Cape Breton adolescents, and the concept of “the pet” in contemporary ethnography. He is a graduate of St. Thomas University (BA Hons. ’96) and Memorial University of Newfoundland (MA ’01; PhD ’10). He was recently included in *The STU Reader*, Goose Lane, 2010.

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I am extraordinarily happy to be speaking here today and on this topic. St. Thomas University was my home for four years and the wellspring of some of the great friendships of my life, but equally the catalyst for discovering the joy that can be found in marshalling one's intellect and passion in the pursuit of that most basic of human projects, wanting to understand.

Briefly, to begin, I was intrigued by Philip McShane's opening keynote, and his reference to the legend of Archimedes and the bathtub. To me this legend – for there is no better word for it: a narrative in active circulation, with the truth or falsity of the ontological events contained therein subject to negotiation and contestation, yet whose presence in our collective tacit repertoire suggests a shared assumption of verisimilitude – is part of our tradition of academic folklore. I get ahead of myself, but I refer the reader to my work elsewhere on the matter (Brodie, 2003).

It is perhaps pedantic to examine the concept of the liberal arts by focusing too much on etymology, but it serves a useful purpose as a contemplative starting point. The “Liberal” referred most literally to the free: those with the leisure to pursue the reflective life and the resources and the franchise to effect change in the world. Where one can easily bring charges of elitism to it, those must be tempered with the recognition that a sense of noblesse oblige was in operation: those who had the leisure and the resources and the franchise had a responsibility to society as a whole for the protection of culture. It was how that culture was defined that would prove problematic and would lead eventually to the breakdown of these divisions. For it was a classicist mindset, where culture was seen not empirically but normatively: in Lonergan's words:

It was the opposite of barbarism. It was a matter of acquiring and assimilating the tastes and skills, the ideals, virtues, and ideas, that were pressed upon one in a good home and through a curriculum in the liberal arts. It stressed not facts but values. It could not but claim to be universalist. Its classics were immortal works of art, its philosophy was the

perennial philosophy, its laws and structures were the deposit of the wisdom and the prudence of mankind. Classicist education was a matter of models to be imitated, of ideal characters to be emulated, of eternal virtues and universally valid laws. It sought to produce not the mere specialist but the *uomo universale* that could turn his hand to anything and do it brilliantly. (Lonergan, 1972, p. 301)

Although Herodotus' *Histories* is sometimes cited as an early ethnographic exploration of other cultures, the study of what was to become known as folklore emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the New Learning of Renaissance humanism intersected with the rise of nations increasingly politically and religiously independent from the Catholic church. Scholars – gentlemen scholars, mainly – cast their gaze not to far-flung corners of the globe but to their own countries, and to the remnants and relics of the past. The creation of an independent, English (or German, or Finnish) identity occasioned a study of those elements distinct to both a place and, it was assumed, a people. An irony of the time, one that continues to plague folklore study, was how print, the very technology that allowed for the New Learning – and which was thus understood as a good in and of itself – was simultaneously threatening the much sought after oral traditions. As John Aubrey (1626-1697) wrote:

Before Printing, Old-wives Tales were ingeniose, and since Printing came into fashion, till a little before the Civill-warres, the ordinary sort of People were not taught to reade. Now-a-dayes Bookes are common, and most of the poor people understand letters; and the many good Bookes, and variety of Turnes of Affaires, have putt all the old Fables out of doors: and divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frighted away Robin-goodfellow and the Fayries. [...] In the old ignorant times before woomen were Readers, ye history was handed downe from mother to daughter, &c. (Aubrey 1878, pp. 67-68).

In other words, the proliferation of media and popular culture was crowding out traditional knowledge, a battle cry that is persistent to this day.

And culture was still conceived along normative, classicist lines. The content was different, as it was the folk culture of 'our' people, not the borrowed culture of the Mediterranean, but it was still perceived as permanent, perennial, eternal. Classical culture also

had the benefit of being mediated and transmitted through text, through making tangible the products of human ingenuity. Folk culture was transmitted through that more fallible of media, the folk themselves. Even the most isolated of the folk, those least affected by the hegemonic culture of the state and the city, were imperfect conduits of a more glorious past. When each link in this chain to the past was susceptible to error, the best one had was a palimpsest of original intent. Add to this the dilution, the degeneracy, the mongrelisation of traditions in contact, and the folklorists set themselves the unenviable task of reconstructing this glorious past.

And reconstruct they did. In 1815 Jacob Grimm wrote a circular in the hopes of forming a folksong- and legend-collecting society, in which he states:

Our fatherland still abounds everywhere with this treasure that our forefathers have transmitted us. Despite all the ridicule and derision with which it has been treated it has survived in secret, unconscious of its own beauty, and carrying its irrepressible essence alone within itself. Without researching it in detail, neither our poetry nor our history nor our language can be fully understood with respect to their ancient and true origins. (Grimm, 1999, pp. 5-6).

Between 1828 and 1835, Elias Lonnrot collected folksongs along the eastern Finnish border and, having been inspired to arrange them in chronological and logical order, published the Kalevala, which was taken up by the Finns as a national epic on the order of The Iliad, The Aeneid, and others. Inspired by philologists and the recognition of Indo-European language groupings, the German Wilhem Mannhardt designed a questionnaire on agrarian customs, prefaced with an explicit appeal to the desire to reconstruct lost traditions:

These are traditions, folktales, customs, beliefs of peasants in which the expert discovers the distinct vestiges of the most ancient beliefs of humanity from which careful research can produce the most precious and trustworthy findings with respect to the primitive history of the Indo-European race, the ancient mythology of the Slavs, the Germans, the Celts, and of Christian archaeology. It is the last moment to gather these valuable scientific materials; they are disappearing every day in the face of increasing civilization, and it is only our generation which will still be able to save for our posterity the last remnants of the customs of our ancestors before they disappear completely (1999, p. 19).

The father and son Julius and Kaarle Krohn, also of Finland, developed the historic-geographic method in which thousands of versions of the same basic tale would be compared and contrasted in hopes of discovering through them the ur-form, the oldest primordial form from which all subsequent versions were derived. A consequent product of this larger effort was Antti Aarne's *The Types of the Folktale*, which provides an elemental description of each tale, including its significant motifs, and begins to integrate them into a larger typology. The American Stith Thompson, who had translated and expanded Aarne's work, compiled the *Motif Index of Folk Literature* which in concert with *The Types of the Folktale* further allows for features recurrent across tales. The Russian structuralist Vladimir Propp looked for deep features within the tale and made the bold suggestion that one can legitimate look at a tale for what it is before answering the question of why and how it came to be that way. Francis James Child, the first person to hold a professorship in English at Harvard, collected and catalogued 305 ballads, each with up to twenty-five variants, in his five volume *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

Narratives and songs were two of the most extensively researched areas, and perhaps provide the best examples of the development of the discipline, but we should be aware that non-narrative forms such as proverbs, riddles, and jests, customs such as harvest rituals and blessing ceremonies, dance, costume, handcrafts, and work techniques were also going through parallel processes of collection, analysis, and placement within a constructed genetic framework.

But disciplines adapt: canons collapse, and approaches become antiquated. The folklorist of the nineteenth century might hardly recognize her counterpart in the twenty-first, but the shift is a product of a reflection on the discipline itself.

Technological advances had influence. Sound recordings – first employed in the field in the 1890s with the cylinder phonograph – allowed for actual performances to be captured, as opposed to texts being transcribed. This shifted the discipline away from an item-centered approach and towards a performance-centered one: to wit, the notion arose that these items are performed within specific contexts, by specific people, to specific audiences, for specific reasons. Changes in the item were reconceived as being not a product of error (although misunderstanding and misinterpretation could still creep in), but more a product of intentional adaptation to performance context and circumstances. “The folk” were not conduits of tradition: rather, individuals who understood themselves as operating within a tradition had repertoires from which they would draw, making deliberate choices about what and how they did. Each performance, in other words, is not a pale imitation but a fresh interpretation of something meaningful within that group’s collective repertoire.

A second shift emerged in North American folkloristics that was largely absent from its European correlates. Until the twentieth century (and perhaps not even then), Europe’s autochthonic people were for the most part the same “ethnicity” as the dominant powers, however differentiated by circumstance and class. In North America, the dominant powers were drawn from immigrants, largely the English. The culture of these powers was English culture, and folk culture was understood as those English traditions transplanted to the New World. The objects proper of folklore study in America (as circumscribed by the opening editorial in the first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*) were

- (a) Relics of Old English Folk-Lore (ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, etc.)
- (b) Lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union.

(c) Lore of the Indian Tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.).

(d) Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc. (Newell, 1889, p. 6)

Newell continued:

As to Old English Lore, the early settlers, in the colonies peopled from Great Britain, not only brought with them the oral traditions of the mother country, but clung to those traditions with the usual tenacity of emigrants transported to a new land. It is certain that up to a recent date, abundant and interesting collections could everywhere had been made. But traditional lore was unprized: the time for its preservation, on both sides of the Atlantic, was suffered to elapse, and what now remains is sufficient to stimulate, rather than satisfy, curiosity. (pp. 3-4)

[Certainly] these remains of a tradition which was once the inheritance of every speaker of the English tongue ought not to be allowed to perish. (p. 5)

The English folk song collectors Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles were specifically looking for remnants of the English folksong tradition in the Americas: new material, that which fell outside the canon and/or that which was self-evidently composed in North America, was dismissed. They worked together in the Appalachians. And a planned trip to Newfoundland was completed by Karpeles alone after Sharp's death.

But it was soon noticed that there were locally-composed songs that nevertheless bore all the hallmarks of traditionality. They were understood as being part of a communal repertoire, their authorship was lost or ignored, they were subject to variation, and they were in active oral circulation. The father and son collectors John and Alan Lomax, who combined collected thousands of songs across the American South and West, Helen Creighton in Nova Scotia, and Louise Manny in New Brunswick were all committed to the value of locally-composed song.

Songs of the lumbercamps, songs of the cowboys, songs of the miners, all were soon recognized as being “folklore,” despite their lack of precedent in the mother land. An item’s time-depth need not be from an unreachable romanticized past: it was possible for new traditions to emerge.

Nor need these traditions emerge solely from “the folk” themselves. Even those collectors open to the value locally-composed song assiduously avoided collecting popular song, learned from exposure to sheet music, travelling theatre musical revues, recordings and radio. But soon enough, on closer reflection, it was noted that they too would be in circulation within small group contexts, subject to variation, and with their authorship and provenance, if not lost or forgotten, then for the most part ignored. Although the association of Barrett’s Privateers with Stan Rogers is strong in Canada and specifically Atlantic Canada, it quickly gained such prominence on the folk festival circuit, both on the stages and in the informal performances of offstage socializing, that within three years of its composition the English folksinger Sandy Colquoun recorded it and attributed it as “traditional” (Greenhill, 1993; Lederman, 1993). In classes I tend to give the example of “Happy Birthday,” with a melody written by the sisters Mildred and Patty Hill in 1893, first appearing in print alongside the familiar lyrics in 1912, and copyrighted in 1935. Irrespective of its current copyright status, it is fair to say that the song is ubiquitous, that most people in this room must have performed it more times than they can remember, and that most cannot remember not knowing it. It is an integral part of one of our most common customs. And, like all good things, it suggests the promise of cake.

I say “our” customs because that indicates the fourth great movement in folklore, the very reconception of “the folk.” Again, the folk were once conceived of as that strata of society with whom the academy, the middle classes, the bourgeois had an at best ambiguous relationship. They were rustic, quaint, unlettered, proud, simple, pastoral: a host of adjectives that could be

simultaneously celebratory and derisive. They were distinctly other, or Othered: one could employ the suffix “folk-“ to indicate something one could both treasure as tradition and dismiss as foolishness: folk medicine, folk religion, folk costume. But it was observed that not only did resource-based occupations like foresters and cowboys have stories, customs, jokes, but so did urban and more modern ones like railway workers, factory workers, firemen, policemen. Then office workers. Then priests. Then university faculties and students. Each had a body of tacit knowledge that, once again, bore all the same hallmarks as folklore: communal, subject to variation, where the issue of provenance or authorship is moot. Folklore, whether one wishes to refer to it by that name or not, occurs in all groups. It is the realm of common sense.

With these four movements – the shift from the study of item to the study of that item in performance, the recognition that new traditions emerge, the acceptance that the folk are engaged in a cultural matrix from which they draw their shared repertoire, both that marked as explicitly traditional and otherwise, and that no one is excluded from participating in a folk culture, converge at the mid to late twentieth century to where folklore study is now: less a study of a content and more of a process. The discipline of Folklore has as its field of inquiry informal expressive culture, with an emphasis on the tacit, the informal, the quotidian, the interstitial, the local, and the marginalized. Its lodestone is tradition, what has been done and what we do again in part because we have done it before, whether that is the marked traditions of our sense of our ethnic inheritance, or that of our occupation, or how we have manifested the habitus of communion with our spouse and family.

Its contribution to the Liberal Arts can be evidenced in a number of ways, but first to be overcome is a perception of what folklore study entails that still lingers in the academy: this is as much a fault of academic folklorists both failing to communicate their discipline as it is the

academy's marginalization of it. The folklorist Bert Wilson, who has spent much of his career not only advocating but demonstrating folklore's place within the humanities, identified three failings that have hindered its integration into the academy (2006, p. 14). The first is the willingness of folklorists to serve as handmaidens to other disciplines. Studies of the genus "folklore in...", while demonstrating how traditional motifs appear in concrete forms, reinforce the notion of the products of folk culture

as unsophisticated, aesthetically inferior material from which the more sophisticated fine arts may have developed or to which writers, composers, painters, and others may occasionally turn for the themes, motifs and images that they, supposedly, will give fuller artistic elaboration. But they seldom see this material as significant artistic expression having originated from the same human imperatives as the works they study. (p. 15)

A second failing, often exacerbated by the public and the state's romanticisation of folk culture, is the tendency to value the creations of the past much more than those of the present. It is in essence a holdover from the nineteenth century anti-modernism and nationalism discussed previously. The present is seen as fleeting, negligible, interstitial, and unimportant. Again, while stories and customs of the past form much of the folklore that is collected, they are contemporary stories and customs, and should be studied with respect to how the folk group at this moment understands itself in relation to the past. And new cultural practices need to be studied, for they tell us about who we are, not simply who we once were. (There is also the practical issue that we should record today's "unnecessary" and "negligible" performances, for they will be what the next generations of antiquarian folklorists will be seeking out: "Tell me grandma, what drinking games did you play in the early twenty-first century?")

A third failing is the tendency to focus on individual groups and what makes them distinct, as opposed to what they share with others. There is necessary work to be done on individual groups, and we only have access to the data for cross-cultural comparison once we

have a sufficient store of locally derived material. My feeling is that a dialogue within folklore needs to occur suggestive of functional specialization, in that much of what is currently being studied can continue so long as there is a larger grasp on how the individual contributes to the overall project. In my programme at Cape Breton University, for example, we have two streams of courses in the second and third years: Atlantic Canada Regional Studies and Folklore Themes and Genres: students must take a minimum from each. Students who come to Cape Breton to participate in the rich cultural heritage must begin to see how these processes are cross-cultural: students who are interested in the theoretical approach must begin to see how these forms are rooted in a sense of place.

One final problem that folklore is to overcome is how the state and the public see it as a potential industry, how the past can be sold to the world at large seeking otherness, and how the traditions one presumes to be of interest in a tourist complex become supported, often at the expense of the actual practices of the actual people themselves.

There is, on one level, no such thing as Irish folklore: there are performances that occur on informal settings, where a specific performer performs something for a specific audience that is constructed and identified as being “Irish” according to the expectations and sensibilities of that group’s understanding of that constructed category. Yes there may be precedent, and memories of that precedent are what inform the audience and performer, and set the criteria for how that performance is received and judged. But folklore exists only in the present: it lacks the permanence of text. It is not a key to understanding who we once were: it is a key to understanding what we at the precise moment of its performance understand ourselves as being. We invoke the past, sometimes, but that invocation is taking place now, for purposes relevant to

the performance context. Just as often we invoke the present, or events so recent that we are to understand them in the same manner as we would the present.

[At this point I again diverged from my original text to provide some illustrations: first of how stories of conspiracy and deception by administration and government arose in response to a sick international student at Cape Breton University; then about “The Peanut Butter Surprise” (see Whatley and Henken 2000).]

And what of the folk? The use of folk as a diminutive prefix has made for further problems of perception. Our Association, the Folklore Studies Association of Canada went through a mild crisis when members from Quebec rejected the term as, in Quebec French at least, it only has that connotation of foolishness and old wives tales. Instead they use the European term of choice “ethnologie”: our journal was renamed from the (admittedly cumbersome) *Canadian Folklore canadien* to the snappy *Ethnologies*, and our Association’s name in French changed from “l’Association canadienne des etudes de folklore” to “l’Association canadienne d’ethnologie et de folklore,” albeit perhaps only as a concession to not changing the initials.

I will now practice a time-honoured tradition, and briefly diverge from the direction of my paper so I can shoehorn in a reference to my abstract, almost seemingly unrelated to the paper I construct so long thereafter. I began with etymology, about the “freedom” of the liberal arts. A parallel to the liberal is the vernacular, from *vernaculus*, a slave born within a master’s house. As a synonym for folk, it is removed from the connotations of quaintness and old-timey-ness that otherwise lead to misconstrual, and it is useful to describe not only what we are doing when we are being Irish, or what we are doing when we are being New Brunswickers, but what we are doing when we are being.

We are products of our group, of our locality. We are not mere products, but much of our quotidian interaction follows the grammar of our sense of place, however interstitial and marginal it may appear when contrasted with our “real” work in scholarship, in theory, in art. In Lonerganian terms, we all operate in the realm of common sense, although we may have further differentiated consciousnesses. Folklore is the effort to come to know that common sense, on the local level, and on the general level to determine what processes of informal cultural expressions are common to humanity. By making that implicit and tacit understanding explicit, by paying heed to it, we engage in the same enterprise that permeates the Liberal Arts.

Writing under different circumstances and for a different purpose, Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks wrote that Folklore “ought to be studied as a ‘conception of the world’” (1999, p. 134), that it “can be understood only as a reflection of the conditions of life of the people” (p. 135), and that, “for the teacher, to know folklore means to know what other conceptions are at work in the moral and intellectual formation of the young generations” (p. 135). When we communicate the achievements of our intellectual heritage to young minds, they are already apprehending it through a lens informed by their quotidian culture. If we avoid, dismiss, or simply ignore the vernacular life, how do we then properly infuse the liberating effects of the liberal arts? Moreover, if we go beyond recognition and recognize the value of local and vernacular culture, can we not break the very opposition of freeman and slave and burst forth into a new, more inclusive, more whole, more just framework of knowing?

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