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The Progress of British Folk-lore Studies during the War Period

by Leslie T. Newman, Halfacre, Blakeney.

During the decade immediately preceding the war there had been a great revival of interest in folk-lore studies which spread through the whole country and attracted all classes of society. Popular lectures were in demand and a large number of text books and original papers, of varying degrees of scholarship, were published to meet the growing needs of workers and those interested in the various fields of folk-lore. Folk-museums and collections of „Bygones“ were established in many provincial towns. Each specialised in some branches of local interest, or maintained general collections of objects illustrating material culture, local industries, obsolete tools and implements, or the relics of past beliefs and practises such as witchcraft, social customs, folkmedicine, tradition and legendary lore.

There was a general change-over from the olden ideas of folk-lore as being merely the collection and arrangement of specimens, records and examples of beliefs and culture associated with definite geographical areas in the country. Indeed, popular taste had swung too far in the other direction and folklorists of all grades inclined to build up elaborate theories from material available rather than to add to the store already accumulated. This tendency was premature as the rapid acceleration of standardized educational systems and a contempt, among the younger generation, for the culture and life of the past had promoted a forgetfulness and break-up of the old beliefs, rural language, traditions and other relics of the past which form the greater part of folk-lore studies. There was, therefore, only a limited time available for collection and record making before much of the great mass of material still unknown, passed into oblivion. Discussion, correlation and analysis of fact and theory can always be carried out but basal data once forgotten, have gone for ever. The old Victorian positivism had given way to an equally unreasonable agnosticism and it was always easier to criticise than to assist in the arduous work of collection and record making. There was also a strong tendency to construct elaborate theories based on personal predilections and conviction rather than on well-sifted material or on logical analysis.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1939 led to an almost complete stoppage of both professional and dilettante studies. Most of the younger and more active workers either joined the services or entered one of the technical branches of civil industry or a government department. The literary and scientific societies which were largely supported by amateur students of their particular subjects, had perforce to reduce their activities to a minimum and work in the field became almost impossible. Folklore in Great Britain, as distinct from the larger and more general subject of Anthropology, depends for progress almost entirely on the individual efforts of part-time independent workers and has little or no place in formal University studies. There are no professorships or even official lectures on general folklore in this country although some anthropologists are interested in those special branch-subjects which are understood as coming under the term „Folklore“.

The urgent war-time demands on personal leisure, with the activities, restrictions and inconveniences of war controls made spare-time studies practically impossible. The Folklore Society of London with great difficulty, maintained — in skeleton at least — its annual programme of meetings with papers and discussions. A group of Oxford residents and war-time visitors, with the active assistance of the late Dr. R. R. Marett, Rector of Exeter College, managed to arrange occasional meetings at that centre of learning. Some informal gatherings of folklorists were also held at Oxford to which members of the Folklore Society were invited. The Eastern Counties Folklore Society centred at Cambridge had always specialized on the collection of local material. In addition to this particular service a full programme of meetings and discussions, where papers of considerable interest were read, had been carried out every year. The war made it impossible to continue the work of the Society during the period under review as nearly all the active workers were absorbed by the army or by government departments. In spite of this some of the members found time to complete work of local interest and several papers of merit were published in specialist journals. Other local Societies domiciled at various centres throughout the country included occasional papers on Folklore in their restricted programmes and there was a small but regular demand for special information on the subject. The auxiliary state services also arranged some lectures on different aspects of folklore in their educational courses designed for members and personnel. Only a shortage of competent

lecturers prevented the inclusion of folklore topics in the various series designed to supply intellectual interests for workers during their brief periods of rest and leisure. The quarterly journal, „Folk-lore“, published by the Folk-lore Society was issued regularly in its usual form but in a sadly reduced size and the Society was also able to produce some additions to the „Extra Volumes“ annual issue. In the Calendar customs group, Vols. III, of both the English and Scottish series, were published in the usual form while the shorter „Manx Calendar customs“ appeared (in parts) in Folk-lore. The „County“ volume on the Orkneys and Shetland Islands was completed and appeared just after the war ended¹.

The late Dr. J. D. Rolleston published some scholarly papers on Folk medicine — each relating to a well-known disease — in the appropriate specialist journals and his death during the war will be severely felt by all students of the subject, as he was practically the only writer on purely medical aspects of folklore. It is hoped that his scattered papers will be collected and published in one volume and so become available to folklorists other than those familiar with the medical journals. Two other important works on the same branch of research, appeared just after the end of hostilities. „Ancient Anodynes“ by Dr. Ellis, which dealt with the folklore of anaesthesia and „Magic and Healing“ by that versatile scholar and biological folklorist, the late Dr. C. J. S. Thompson. The volume was published after his death. These may be considered as forming part of war-time activities and output although they actually appeared after hostilities had ceased. A considerable number of other equally interesting volumes on folklore and allied subjects also appeared either during, or just after, the war. These were of widely differing standards of attainment — some being serious contributions to the literature of the subject while others were mainly popular introductions to folklore problems for non scientific readers. Four volumes on witchcraft — the most popular of all branches of folklore study — were also included in the war-time literary output. Mr. R. Trevor Davies and the Rev. Montague Summers writing from widely differing points of view presented their subject — witchcraft — in considerable detail and well documented. Other works on folklore subjects appeared as „war publications“ and met, very adequately, the

¹ British Calendar Customs: England, vol. III, 1940; Scotland, vol. III, 1941: Orkney and Shetland, by M. Macleod Banks, 1946. — Manx Calendar Customs, by C. I. Paton, London, s. a. (Publications of the Folk-lore Society, vols. CVI, CVIII, CXII, CX).

popular vogue for simple instructional and amusing handbooks so much in demand during recent years. The needs of readers in search of thrills and horrors were also adequately met. A considered scheme for carrying out a detailed study of Welsh folklore and folkculture in all its varied aspects including early life and literature together with the traditional history of the Principality was finally approved and the work has been in progress for about four years. The survey is in the charge of a committee working under the general direction of Welsh scholars and the Council of the Folklore Society. Representatives of the National Library, the University and the National Museum of Wales have issued a series of questionnaires on the above mentioned points and a mass of important material has already been collected and critically examined. The survey will take some time to complete, but it is hoped that the final report will be published, in due course, in a special series of volumes.

The castle and estate of S. Fagan's near Cardiff has been presented by the owners to the Principality for the purpose of forming a museum of the folklore, material culture, archaeology, history and ancient crafts of Wales. This site will provide space, in a fine natural setting, for a museum equal to any in the world. It will include full-sized models of old houses, farms, workshops and special buildings to illustrate the folk-history and ancient crafts of Wales. In nearly all the local folk-museums of Great Britain the sections dealing with agriculture and rural life have been added-to in response to the recent and war-time revival of interest in both present day and ancient farming methods.

In spite of the many difficulties of the war period and restrictions resulting from controls as well as from military necessity, the study of folklore in all its branches has made considerable progress and every effort possible during the past eight years has been made to carry on the great traditions of the earlier workers on folklore in this country. When normal conditions and a return of civil freedom allow further progress to be made in the liberal arts and sciences, the study of British folklore will again take its place among the literary and technical interests of those interested in the life and culture of the past in this country.

Bibliography of the more important works issued or prepared during the period 1939—1945: Sacheverell Sitwell, *Poltergeists* (Faber and Faber, 1940). Christina Hole, *English Custom and Usage* (Batsford, 1941). Hulda Ellis, *The Road to Hel* (C. U. P., 1943). M. Sumners, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (Rider, 1945). C. J. S. Thompson, *Magic and Healing* (Rider, 1946). E. S. Ellis, *Ancient Anodynes* (Heinemann). Trevor Davies, *Four centuries of Witch Beliefs* (Methuen, 1947). L. Spence, *Fairy Tradition in Britain* (1948).