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Marrow of Human Experience, The

William Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy

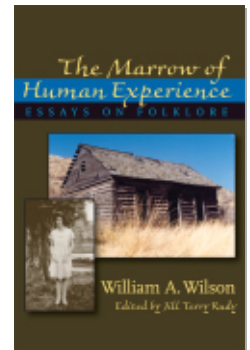
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## INTRODUCTION

I often misplace certain William A. “Bert” Wilson articles and then find them in unexpected locations. When researching Mormon folklore, I may need “On Being Human” and finally find the article in a folder marked “Definitions of Folklore” or “Folklore and the Humanities.” The article might be tucked in the folder I use for the Introduction to Folklore course or even in the folder for my advanced writing class. The process gets repeated for the “Deeper Necessity” article, the “Herder” article, and others. For this very personal reason, I have wanted a book compiling Bert Wilson’s essays. I want a good variety of his writings in one easily accessible and transportable collection.

More seriously, and less selfishly, I requested to work on this essay collection with Bert so others could receive and study the work of an excellent teacher and champion of folklore studies and the humanities. The essays won’t convey exactly what it was like to be in his classroom, what it was like to experience the variety of personal experiences, lectures, slide shows, guest speakers, films, and other multimedia displays he used to present folklore in all its varieties to his students. But these writings will introduce new and ongoing students of folklore to useful definitions and functions of folklore study. They may guide readers who know little of this field, as well as seasoned folklorists, to recognize and remember the imperatives of traditional expression—the powerful needs to create, to know, and to commune within the realms of change, continuity, and a common humanity. These essays in folklore will immerse their readers in Bert’s passion for folklore as a way to negotiate recurring human needs, to recognize the values and concerns of particular groups, and to understand what it means to be human.

## MAKING THIS COLLECTION

When studying folklore, it seems important to indicate that the creation and sharing of knowledge takes place through face-to-face contacts as well as by reading and writing. I studied folklore with Bert as a master’s student at Brigham Young University and heard him give several of the invited lectures on Mormon narrative traditions now included here. As a folklore doctoral student at Indiana University, I discovered that he had a wider influence than Mormon folklore when my

professors expressed their appreciation for his work on Finnish nationalism and folklore in the academy. Knowing of the regard for Bert and his contributions to the field, I more fully understood the scope and impact of his work. When we began to make this essay collection, I invited his scholarly peers and former students, whom he always treats as peers, to contribute introductory notes to the essays so readers could more easily see this impact. By gathering in one collection Bert's words from four decades of work, we can better understand his vision of folklore studies that builds bridges across academic disciplines and unites such seemingly diverse areas of specialty as romantic nationalism and Mormon folklore.

It is fitting that Michael Owen Jones wrote in his introductory note to "On Being Human" that "All of us are influenced by the writing of others." The format of this book is based on Jones's essay collection, *Exploring Folk Art: Twenty Years of Thought on Craft, Work, and Aesthetics*. In his collection Jones included introductory headnotes explaining the personal and disciplinary context of his writings, and I enjoyed reading the notes as much as reading his articles. Contributors have been enthusiastic and thoughtful in providing their introductory responses to the essays and commenting on their relationship with Bert and his ideas. Some contributors refer to Bert informally by his first name, while others use his last name; either name is a sign of esteem and respect. As mentioned in most of the introductions and especially in the biographical sketch by his daughter Denise Jamsa, Bert Wilson is recognized as a community builder; therefore, it is particularly appropriate in his essay collection to include the voices of others interacting with his life and work. Many other colleagues and former students could have provided commentary on Bert's influence, but the mirror I have held is influenced by my relationships with Bert and these contributors at this particular time.

Selecting essays to include has been a delight; deciding which essays to eliminate from the collection has been difficult. I made initial selections, invited the writers to contribute introductory notes, and grouped the essays somewhat thematically by folklore and the academy, folklore and religion, and folklore and Finnish nationalism. The initial order of sections and essays was improved by the careful reading of John Alley, our USU Press editor. On more than one occasion with Bert, I have compared the process of essay selection to compiling a "greatest hits" collection, suggesting that creating another volume later could be an option. Bert has preferred instead to winnow some previously published articles and include some unpublished papers in order to consider this as his standard. He consistently has chosen to add more recent works, preferring to present how his ideas have developed and matured rather than simply using the collection as a documentary of past thought. For example, later in the manuscript process he announced that he wanted to replace "Fact amid the Legends" with the more recent "The Folk Speak," explaining that the two pieces expressed similar ideas but he liked the later iteration better. In the midst of making final changes to this manuscript, he also traveled to Finland to present another paper on the *Kalevala*. Perhaps knowing of the looming deadline from the publisher, he did not even ask about including the new paper in this collection, but the paper will be revised and published. For these reasons, not all of Bert's work could possibly be included, and interested readers

should attend to the bibliography and consider this collection as some of the highlights of an ongoing academic career.

## RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLKLORE THROUGH USEFULNESS AND ARTFULNESS

Although there is a tendency to shield students from committee work and institutional administration, it is important to know that professors do more than lecture in a classroom and sit in an office reading and writing. The first essays in this collection acknowledge Bert's many roles as a teacher, scholar, archivist, and cultural critic while also providing a helpful introduction to folklore studies and a clear definition of folklore. Through essays in this section, Bert demonstrates the usefulness of folklore in the ways that stories, sayings, artifacts, and customs afford creative and artful responses to the human condition. In his memorable essay "The Deeper Necessity," Bert upholds the human need for order and beauty as a necessity that cannot be restricted only to certain gifted individuals or elite groups. He claims that the impulse to create, or to be artful, is an essential component of being human. Moving beyond restricting definitions of *folk literature* to *literature* or from *folk art* to *art*, he notes that folklore crosses disciplinary boundaries showing a deeply human need to be creative. In advocating that folklore study be infused in the humanities curriculum and attended to by policymakers, he teaches that our traditions are a useful and artful display of our humanity.

Bert combines and transcends academic categories by building bridges or dismantling walls between the arts, humanities, and history. In essays on folklore in the academy, on tradition and cultural policy, and on contemporary views of the past, he shows that folklore is an imperative form of expression that must be considered to fully understand human creativity and endurance. As Beverly Stoeltje notes in her introduction to "Building Bridges: Folklore in the Academy," Bert's work links folklore study with action and connects ideas with their implementation in society. He explains in several essays that these connections are inherent in folklore itself and that the study of folklore, therefore, should be integrative. For example, in writing about folklore and history, he asserts that folklore shows what people value from the past by documenting the stories, sayings, and attitudes that they share in the present. The historical record, he explains, will be minimized without adding in the facts expressed through lore.

Access to traditional expressions is enhanced by thoughtful archival work, and in "Documenting Folklore" Bert explains why and how students should become contributors to folklore archives. In this essay he also defines folklore as the things people make, say, and do and introduces the three main categories of folklore studies: material, verbal, and customary lore. While the categories help clarify, especially for new students, the myriad forms of traditional expression that folklorists claim in their studies, the example of birthday party traditions shows how folklore performances combine and transcend categories in contexts that are understood and enjoyed by participants. We may not label the birthday cake "material lore," the birthday song "verbal lore," or the giving of presents "customary

lore,” but many cultural groups would have a hard time recognizing a birthday without these traditions. Placing labels on traditions may help us appreciate them in new ways. Through Bert’s writings, he teaches that we are all the folk who use traditional expressions because we are human beings working through similar needs and situations in culturally specific groups of people.

## UNDERSTANDING OTHERS THROUGH FOLKLORE

Although much of Bert’s career is centered on his study of Mormon folklore, his scholarship on the role of folklore in constructing national identity is also a significant contribution. Bert’s work shows that folklore study is not only a warm, fuzzy collection of one’s own deeply cherished traditions but also a politically and intellectually charged act of interpreting and shaping reality. Essays in this section connect with Bert’s work on folklore, cultural policy, and the humanities to show that scholarship is a form of action that cannot be isolated to classrooms, academic disciplines, or universities. Exemplified by his study of nationalism, Bert’s position as a sympathetic outsider to Finnish culture has given him challenges and opportunities that have affected his personal and professional life. By acknowledging that intellectuals can use traditional expressions to fabricate a national past and influence the present, Bert’s work provides a timely reminder that ideas must be thoughtfully pursued because there are consequences when individuals and groups are led to act on their knowledge, values, and beliefs.

This section includes Bert’s writing on folklore and Herder, romantic nationalism, and Finnish American identity construction. These essays show that folklore study may lead to self-understanding and to awareness of the humanity of others, but they acknowledge that folklore study also can be constructed to fulfill the wishes of scholars. Phillip McArthur, in introducing “Folklore, Nationalism, and the Challenge of the Future,” points out that Bert is well aware of the dual nature of folklore as it is performed and as it is studied. Folklore can be used to denigrate other groups and create boundaries to keep a group isolated, while folklore can also be used to celebrate a group and make connections between individuals and other groups. Folklore study can be used for nationalistic propaganda to promote a group beyond all other groups and to argue for political and territorial privileges, while it can also be used to critique misuses of authority and to make legitimate claims for cultural and political autonomy. In all this, Bert sees human impulses at work and at play; he advocates an understanding of traditional expression that includes self-awareness, appreciating diversity, and honoring a common humanity.

## STUDYING CLOSELY ONE GROUP— RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALS

While understanding what it means to be human is a consistent theme in Bert’s writings, he admits that his own research has sought the universal through the

particular. In this respect, his methodological practices match the preferences of folklore as an academic field. Students who learn through concrete examples before leaping to abstractions will appreciate that folklorists collect particular expressions as a way to work toward generalizations about individuals and groups. As suggested by Jackie Thursby's introduction to "The Concept of the West," Bert frequently will use his own, and his family's, experiences to introduce a particular kind of traditional expression. He then will add examples from archival collections and evoke his audience's experiences to lead to generalizations. Especially notable in "On Being Human," he often concludes that people use folklore to release tensions, to negotiate boundaries, and to draw meaning from uncertain circumstances.

Some of the headnotes and the biographical sketch describe Bert's involvement as a practicing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the LDS church or as the Mormons, for accepting the Book of Mormon as scripture. As a folklorist, Bert does not study primarily the theology and doctrines of the church but rather the stories, customs, and humor that members of the group share. In his introduction to "The Study of Mormon Folklore," David Hufford acknowledges that Bert's participation in the religious group he studies has caused some concern among academics who prefer the appearance of objectivity in scholarship. However, many of his peers acknowledge the value of his insider status both for members of the academy and for members of the religion. Steve Siporin explains in his introduction to "Freeways, Parking Lots, and Ice Cream Stands" that Bert's work on Mormon folklore demonstrates that religious belief and practices do not disappear in the face of claims that such expressions are outdated or unnecessary in modern life.

After some discussion over what would be included in this section, Bert convinced me that his initial article on Three Nephite legends in Indiana, although significant as his first publication on Mormon lore, was not as helpful for students as the more analytic discussion in "Freeways." This collection of essays, therefore, shows a scholar changing his approach to his subject after years of study. He first changed from the textual approach of collecting legends and comparing them with a motif index to a more performative approach of analyzing a collection for function and meaning. Over the years, Bert increasingly calls for study of the less sensational expressions of religiosity and for the scholar to account for his or her biases in presenting the values of other people. As "Freeways" was being published, Bert was turning attention away from the supernatural legends to call in "An Uncertain Mirror for Truth" for stories that represent the more common acts of service and faith performed by members of the LDS church. This change is articulated most clearly in the essays in this section where Bert shifts focus from *folk religion* to *religious folklore* and asks that folklorists study the daily acts of service and other practices of religious individuals.

Whether one is a religious individual or not, he or she can find in Bert's extensive study of Mormon lore another use for folklore. Bert's work shows how studying the traditions of particular individuals in specific groups can encourage

deeper insights into human behavior. This collection concludes with “The Family Novel,” a piece that echoes the sentiments of “A Deeper Necessity” by advocating the necessity of artful expression in family relationships and the power of personal stories in living well amid the struggles of life. The essay makes a bold claim, consistent with other ideas developed through this body of work, that scholars should consider their own traditions and experiences as they seek to understand the expressions and motivations of others. Intensely personal and honest, the essay highlights the significance of intertextuality and community in understanding and appreciating family stories. The essay leads fittingly into a biographical sketch written by one of Bert’s daughters, who concludes the sketch by quoting the final lines of “A Family Novel.” A constant teacher, Bert turns his audiences to their own experiences of folklore and their own opportunities to thoughtfully value the traditional expressions of others and themselves.

The majority of essays included here were originally presented as lectures; they often begin with Bert directly addressing his audience and inviting them to consider his topic of discussion. Many have been published and republished in venues that are acknowledged in each essay or in the bibliography at the conclusion of the book. While a primary purpose of this collection is to emphasize the value of studying folklore, another reason is to show the development and breadth of a scholar’s work. Scholarship is a human activity, and the introductory notes and biographical sketch, as well as the essays, are meant to introduce readers to the man who presents these ideas as well as to the ideas themselves. New students of folklore should focus their reading on Bert’s words because of his clear ideas, writing style, and voice. The introductory notes will be particularly useful for more experienced students who want to learn how a scholar’s work draws from and influences others. Promoting folklore as a scholarly field has been a major undertaking in Bert’s life that has seeped into mine as well. We will be most pleased if readers of this collection come to see their worlds differently because they recognize and understand the function, complexities, and beauty of folklore performances in their own and other’s lives. Through his essays on folklore, Bert Wilson reaches the core of human expression and honors the capacity to adapt traditions to prevail over life’s challenges.

—*Jill Terry Rudy*