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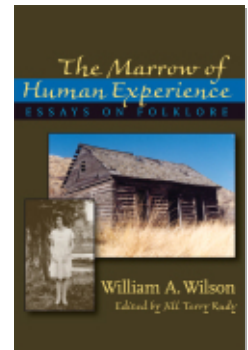
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FOLKLORE, NATIONALISM, AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE

Whether on Finnish nationalism or Mormon popular expressions, William A. “Bert” Wilson has moved as gracefully as any folklorist between the romantic and the critical motivational poles of folklore study. On the one hand, folklorists participate in a celebration of disempowered voices, marginalized peoples, and the everyday. On the other hand, folklorists engage in critiques of power, confronting hegemonic discourses and dominant representations. Bert challenges us to think about the role of folklore in the creation of power while also asking us to remain hopeful in the human condition as we celebrate diversity. If anything, Bert remains honest—honest in reporting the achievements and ironies in a group’s folklore and honest with himself in appreciating and holding ambivalence for that same folklore. In this piece, which was a plenary address of a special conference on folksong sponsored by the Archives of Latvian Folklore, he makes bare both his honest suspicion and optimism in folklore.

There is an interesting tension presented in this paper between the danger in folklore’s power to persuade and impose, and the promise of folklore to empower and liberate. In his work on Herder and Finnish nationalism, Bert implies that scholars must pay attention to the interplay of art and politics. What makes Herder’s model of using the poetic “national soul” to cultivate sentiments of attachment and legitimacy of the nation so dangerous is more than simply how national identities can be pitted against each other. The danger lies in how people can be persuaded by folklore forms to participate in acts of domination and aggression, or minimally, persuaded to essentialize difference and imagine themselves in superior positions. As Bert reminds us, what makes this model even more dubious is that such nationalisms do not emanate out from the “people,” but represent scholarly constructs of imagined pasts driven by ideological agendas in the present, imposed on “others” and the “people” themselves.

But Bert also sees promise in folklore, because it has proven to empower dependent and suppressed groups as they seek independence and because it may prove

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to liberate the “human spirit” and help us find a “common humanity” amidst our divisive national differences. This promise in folklore must be tempered with two cautions, however. First, both the oppressor and the oppressed, the dominant and the marginalized, can use folklore for their own purposes. Second, the empowering of one group too often leads to a new suppression of other groups within a nation (e.g. by gender, class, ethnicity, religion) and without (e.g. other territorial groups). Bert appreciates that national boundaries are always messy, crosscutting and blurring salient group formations, and that internal homogeneity within is a fiction. He proposes then that we can at once promote the multicultural and think beyond nationalism to a shared humanity.

I share in Bert’s critical gaze and romantic optimism, but it is now time to rethink two contemporary implications. First, too much emphasis on the spurious, or constructed, nature of national identities may neglect how people share a history of making and reproducing images and forms that are experientially meaningful. To over-emphasize the fiction of identity formation may represent a new form of colonization, because it neglects how folklore serves many oppressed peoples as their cultural capital for resistance and it perpetuates domination by undercutting the oppressed’s counter-rhetoric. Second, national identity formations can hardly maintain themselves with two seemingly contradictory contemporary forces: globalization and fragmentation. Globalization has created transnational and multinational identities while fragmentation has rekindled old divisions within nation-states or allowed new identities to form in new territorial and cultural spaces. This intersection of the global and the local often operates independent of old nationalisms. Understanding the “challenge of [this] future” will be a challenge to folklore scholarship in the early twenty-first century. This does not mean nationalism will no longer prove a powerful construct, but folklorists will need to waver between complex poles as Bert has done to illuminate the power of folklore in these global changes.

—*Phillip McArthur*

WE MARK THIS YEAR THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF JOHANN Gottfried von Herder. I was first brought to a study of Herder because I was curious to know how the scattered groups of people living in Finland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, speaking separate dialects and feeling precious little kinship with each other, could have possibly coalesced by the end of the century into a people unified enough to resist terrific Russian assimilation pressures and two decades later actually become an independent nation. My quest for answers led me to certain key ideas of Herder that were making their way to Finland shortly after Finland became a Russian grand duchy in 1809 and that had direct applicability to circumstances prevailing at the time.

First, Herder taught that each nation is a distinct organic unit created by its own peculiar environmental and historical circumstances and different, therefore, from all other nations. The organic structures of these units were reflected in what Herder called national characters or national souls.

Second, Herder taught that a nation could not survive as a nation and could not contribute to the progress of humanity as a whole unless it remained true to its national character; it must cultivate its own native cultural and artistic traditions along lines laid down by past experience. "Each [nationality]," declared Herder, "carries within itself the standard of its own perfection which can in no way be compared with that of others." Again and again he declared that the most natural state was one people with one national character. Therefore, nothing seemed so unnatural to him as the "wild mixing of various breeds and nations under one scepter" (1967–1968, 14: 227; 13: 384). To introduce foreign elements into a unified organic nation, into the body politic, would, he believed, ultimately lead to the death of that nation.

Third, Herder taught that the cultural and historical pattern of a people—the national soul—is expressed best in its language and particularly in its folk poetry, the loftiest expression to which language could aspire. "Poetry," said Herder, "is the expression of the weaknesses and perfections of a nationality, a mirror of its sentiments, the expression of the highest to which it aspired." Folk poems he called "the archives of a nationality," "the imprints of the soul" of a nation, "the living voice of the nationalities." From them one could "learn the mode of thought of a nationality and its language of feeling" (1967–1968, 18: 137; 9: 532; 3: 29; 24: 266; 9: 530). Clearly, then, if one wanted to live in harmony with his own nation, to capture its spirit and make it his own, one must do so by absorbing its poetry and living in accordance with its spirit.

Finally, Herder taught that should a nation's continuity with its past be broken, as had been the case with Germany following the Middle Ages, and had certainly been the case of Finland during six hundred years of Swedish rule, the only hope for salvation lay in collecting from the peasant population the old poems surviving from the golden age of the past and then using them to restore to the nation its national soul and to develop its future national progress on a native foundation.

Motivated by these dogmas, a generation of young Finnish scholar-patriots, Elias Lönnrot chief among them, began trekking the Finnish hinterlands, collecting the folk poems which Lönnrot would in 1835 combine into the national epic, the *Kalevala*. The publication of the *Kalevala* would inspire two national awakenings—the first following the appearance of the epic, the second occurring at the end of the century, when Finnish artists, musicians, poets, and writers turned to the *Kalevala* for the inspiration necessary to create a truly national art. Both awakenings, combined with other forces, would lead eventually to Finnish independence in 1917.

Similar nationalistic movements, of course, developed elsewhere in Europe and later in Africa and Asia. Whenever dependent or suppressed peoples have sought in their folklore historical justification for their separatist policies, they have followed lines laid down by Herder (Wilson 1973b). Today, with the breakup of the former Soviet Union and with nations constituting or reconstituting themselves, the old dogmas are coming back into play.

As we turn our attention to these movements, it is essential to remember at least three things: First, the terms “national identity,” or “ethnic identity,” do not originally derive from the people nor are they the result of natural law. They are, rather, scholarly constructs, or, as folklorist Roger Abrahams has suggested, “powerful fictions” (1993, 5), created by the intelligentsia in order to move the people in directions the intelligentsia wish. Second, to move the people in these directions, the intelligentsia must teach them to recognize, value, and shape their lives according to these constructs. Third, the ends which proponents of national or ethnic identity serve are always ideologically motivated. Considering these circumstances, those engaged in national movements carry a heavy burden of acting in morally responsible and humane ways.

Some today consider all nationalistic movements bad. I do not hold that view. In 1835, the year the *Kalevala* was published, Finnish-speaking citizens, the bulk of the population, could not hear their own legal cases tried in court in their own language; social and educational opportunities and advancement were open only to those who spoke Swedish (there were no Finnish-language schools); and only one Finnish-language newspaper was being published. By the turn of the century, these conditions had been dramatically reversed. Finnish had been given equal status with Swedish, and public officials were required to speak the language of the districts to which they were assigned. Shortly after the turn of the century, 3,678 Finnish-language primary schools were in operation, and Finnish-speaking secondary schools outnumbered Swedish-speaking schools. By 1910, eighty-six Finnish-language newspapers were being published. At that moment, Finnish nationalists could look back at their efforts to improve the lot of their countrymen with justifiable pride (Wilson 1976a, 26–66).

But during the twentieth century, nationalistic movements and the folklore scholarship that supports them have frequently moved in unfortunate directions—directions Herder could not have envisioned. Time will allow only brief mention of three of these.

First, in pursuit of national ideals, we have too often kept our eyes riveted on the past and have ignored present realities. In 1815, the ardent Finnish nationalist Adolf Ivar Arwidsson turned to folk poetry in an attempt to find “a more natural and more pure tongue” (Heikinheimo 1933, 120–21); a few years later he urged that the old folk poetry be collected so that “we might be able to create new temples to the art of the fatherland on this native foundation.” “Antiquities,” he said, speaking of the old poetry, “live in the people’s chronicles and in their artistic creations, in which they survive from times immemorial.” Thus every nation that wishes to be true to its own character “must return to the furthest roots of all its native power, strength, and energy—to the pure spring of native poetry. Everything must be built on a native foundation” (Arwidsson 1909, 67–68, 138).

This view, that the past is always better than the present, has led to a number of unhappy results. In my own country, those who have studied immigrant

communities have too often focused only on those “pure” old forms brought to the United States from the immigrants’ countries of origins. Speaking of this approach to the study of Finnish American traditions, Yvonne Lockwood writes: “For many decades scholars researched only the folklife of the Old Country and the remnants or survivals of early immigrant life. The alterations and adaptations in immigrant culture to forms that suited the United States context were actually regarded as poor copies of ‘pure’ Old Country culture” (1990, 5). Consequently, the rich cultural forms resulting from immigrant traditions adapting to an American environment have been ignored—and both our scholarship and our understanding have suffered.

A similar attempt to focus on the untainted past can be seen in UNESCO’s efforts to preserve and safeguard folklore. According to Lauri Honko, who has summarized UNESCO’s work for the *Newsletter* of the Nordic Institute of Folklore, “the cultural and psychological reaction in the western industrialized countries” to the pains brought about by developments in our technological, electronic world “has been regionalism and a return to old tradition” (1982, 2). We should, of course, study the old traditions but in the context of the contemporary technological world. To do otherwise is akin to studying immigrant traditions in the United States without paying any attention to the American environment in which they are enacted. Like it or not, we live in an electronic, technological world that is here to stay. Our task should be to focus on all our citizens, not just those living on the margins of modernity; we should identify the traditional forms they have borrowed, adapted, and generated in response to the circumstances of their lives and then demonstrate how these forms, like older forms of folklore, fulfill human needs common to us all.

In any attempt to capture the past through folklore study and to make that past the pattern for contemporary society, we should remember, as postmodern criticism has taught us, that we never actually capture reality in language; we construct it. Narrators of the past do not give us objectively accurate portraits of what really occurred in earlier times but rather stories shaped by their own personalities and forged in response to present needs. Their narratives, therefore, are often more akin to fiction, in the best sense of the word, than to history. That is, they are creative interpretations of the past that may in the final analysis tell us a good deal more about the narrators themselves than about the events they describe. As a result, they seldom provide adequate models for the building of modern states.

And that leads me to my second concern with folklore-based nationalistic efforts. In 1921 the prominent Finnish educator E. A. Saarimaa repeated for his fellow teachers a sentiment that had persisted throughout the entire nationalistic movement: “The national significance of our folklore,” said Saarimaa, “. . . entitles it to a prominent position in the national literature studied in our secondary schools. But particularly the fact that our nation’s individuality is best revealed in this poetry makes learning it important. The nation’s soul is nowhere reflected so clearly as in its almost collectively created poetry. And one

of the most important tasks of the secondary school is to acquaint the students with their own nation" (1921, 1–2). It may be true that folklore captures the soul of a people, but it is equally true that the image of that soul reflected in folklore is also a constructed image, a reflection not necessarily of an objective reality but rather of the ideological predisposition of the individual holding the mirror. That is something we must always remember when anyone tries to move us to action by encouraging us, as loyal citizens, to conform to a behavioral pattern suggested by our folklore.

Such attempts occurred in Finland between the world wars, when propagandists from both sides of the political spectrum insisted that the *Kalevala*, a work supposedly sprung from the hearts of the people, reflected their own particular points of view and then argued for diametrically opposed courses of action—the political right to generate in the citizenry a militaristic posture and to argue for an expansionist foreign policy that included annexing East Karelia into a Greater Finland; the political left to counter the ideology of the right and to argue for a classless, communist society (Wilson 1976a, 118–203). In 1956 Finland's President J. K. Paasikivi, architect of Finland's postwar foreign policy, wrote: "The East Karelian issue, though it was a daydream with no realistic foundation, has greatly damaged us and our relationship with the Soviet Union. It stimulated mistrust of us. This [East Karelia] enthusiasm awakened in the Soviet Union greater attention [to Finland] than has been thought" (1959, 7). At the negotiating table, the Finns would at war's end pay a dear price for the Greater Finland dream, a dream based in part on a questionable interpretation of the national epic.

My third concern with nationalistic pursuits that draw support from folklore study relates directly to current attempts to establish, or re-establish, national governments in lands formerly under control of the Communist empire. In 1817, the energetic Carl Axel Gottlund, in words that bore the clear imprint of Herder, declared: "Just as an independent nation cannot exist without a fatherland, no fatherland can exist without poetry. For what is poetry except the crystal in which nationality mirrors itself, the spring from which the nation's original feelings rise to the surface" (Heikinheimo 1933, 307–8). In a nation whose people comprise a reasonably homogeneous population, such a sentiment may make sense. But few such nations exist today. In most Eastern European lands, and indeed in much of Europe, different ethnic groups reside within the same national boundaries. In the passage cited above, Paasikivi attributed much of the excessive Greater Finland fervor to ideas promulgated earlier by Finnish nationalist J. V. Snellman. In words that have proven more prophetic than either Paasikivi or Snellman could have possibly imagined, Snellman declared: "As broadly as the Bulgarian language is spoken just as broadly should national Bulgaria extend. . . . As broadly as the Serbian language is spoken should Serbia extend" (Paasikivi 1959, 6).

As we all know, those geographic spaces where Serbian is spoken are also occupied by other peoples. And we all know the terrible price being paid as one

or another of these peoples attempts to establish its hegemony. Speaking to this issue recently, Roger Abrahams states:

Attempts to redress historical dislocations can lead to struggles for self-realization that resuscitate arguments developed during the formative period of earlier nation-states. In these struggles, we witness the revival of the notion of fatherland that maintains a confrontational stance vis-à-vis conquering regimes seeking to subject various groups to marginalization or expulsion. . . . The recent history of much of Eastern Europe shows that one people's nationalism can be transformed into the means by which other peoples are disenfranchised. (1993, 5)

In this day of ethnic cleansing, disenfranchising, and ethnic warfare, the old models clearly no longer work. If we are to avoid the horrors already developing, we must adopt at least two seemingly different but mutually supporting stratagems.

First, we must develop a multicultural approach that finds strength in diversity and leads us to enrich our lives by learning to value and appreciate the cultural heritages of all the people living within our national boundaries—an approach Herder himself may have favored, since he cherished the cultural traditions of all peoples. Speaking of circumstances in his country, Australian folklorist Keith McKenry states:

The folklife of Australia comprises a diverse body of living traditions . . . which we have inherited not only from earlier generations of Australians but also from our forebears in other parts of the world. These traditions run deep, giving each of us our sense of cultural identity, yet binding us together as Australians and giving us a basis for sharing, as members of Australia's rich multicultural society. (Honko 1988, 6)

In my own country, the United States Congress has passed an American Folklife Preservation Act that stresses the same principles. Among other things it states:

The Congress hereby finds and declares—(1) that the diversity inherent in American folklife has contributed greatly to the cultural richness of the Nation and has fostered a sense of individuality and identity among the American people; (2) that the history of the United States effectively demonstrates that building a strong nation does not require the sacrifice of cultural differences. (1976)

Following the ideals stated here, the Folk Arts Program of our National Endowment for the Arts has attempted to identify, study, and bring to public attention the cultural heritages of all our people. I am not trying to impose an American model on anyone, but the decision to value rather than to combat difference seems a much safer course in today's perilous world.

Finally, we must seek in the differing cultural heritages of our neighbors not just those features that separate us from each other but also those which unite us—not just those traditional behaviors arising from our national or ethnic uniqueness, but those given birth by our common humanity, by our common human struggle to endure. Clearly, folklore is shaped by the groups that perform it and thus keep it alive; as a result, it can increase our understanding of and sympathy for these groups. But as we seek to understand these different peoples through their folklore, we should remember that in the final analysis folklore is cut from the marrow of human experience. For me, the great value of the *Kalevala* is that it illuminates not just the Finnish spirit but also the human spirit. Like all good literature it confronts again and again those enduring human problems which have neither time nor place. As I read the *Kalevala* I do not have to be a Finn to be moved by the hapless Kullervo's desperate question to his mother: "Will you mourn for me, my mother, / When you hear that I am dead?" And I do not have to be a Finn to weep with his mother as she responds: "You don't know a mother's mind, / Understand a mother's heart. . . . / I will flood the house with weeping, / Making waves upon the floorboards; . . . / What I cannot bear to weep, / Cannot bear to weep in public, / I will sob out in the sauna, / Weep in secret in the sauna, / Overflowing bench and platform" (Lönnrot [1849] 1984, 253).

Properly understood, then, the folklore of different nationalities and different ethnicities will, to be sure, help us understand what it is to be Finns, or Americans, or Japanese, or Latvians, or Russians. But it will also help us realize what it means to be human beings.