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Wayland Hand—Utah Folklorist, International Scholar

Barre Toelken

Wayland Debs Hand was born in Auckland, New Zealand, on March 19, 1907. His father, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in England, had been attracted to Mormonism because its communal model appealed to his strong Socialist convictions. Indeed, he chose his son’s middle name to honor Eugene V. Debs—railroad worker, unionist, and Socialist presidential candidate. The family had moved to New Zealand in hopes of improving the health of Hand’s mother and the family’s financial standing, but finances did not improve so the family moved again, this time to Calgary, Alberta, where they lived with Hand’s uncle.

Eventually returning to Salt Lake City, Hand’s family lived in modest circumstances in the Sugarhouse area, where his father worked as a mail carrier. Hand’s mother died while he was still young, and his father later married a Dutch woman. Hand attended Granite High School, where he was a member of the baseball team and a budding journalist who worked on the newspaper and yearbook. Both of these interests continued throughout his life, the one in his lifelong love affair with baseball, the other in his hunt-and-peck typing style—though he did, in his seventies, learn touch typing.

More than anything, Hand wanted to be a professional baseball player, and he did play semipro ball in Tooele for a time. But his interests in writing and in literature began to take him in another direction. He had a flair for languages and began to busy himself with the study of Latin and Greek; he picked up Dutch from his stepmother and developed an interest in German. This interest in the study of languages continued throughout his life; he later taught himself Scandinavian languages and even learned Portuguese when he was in his late seventies for an essay on the beliefs and customs of the fishermen of San Pedro, California.

After serving a mission in Germany for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Hand entered the University of Utah and obtained his B.A. in German in 1933 and his M.A. the following year. Two years later, he earned a Ph.D. in German from the University of Chicago, where he wrote, under the
direction of renowned folklorist Archer Taylor, his doctoral dissertation on an Alpine folk lyric. Their personal and professional friendship continued to the end of Taylor’s life.

As Hand’s interest in folklore grew and his intellectual perspectives developed, he turned to the folklore of his own religious background and published in 1938 the first major article on legends of the Three Nephites. In ensuing years, he became less active in the church but never broke with it, maintaining his respect for the faith and his interest in its cultural dimensions. Along with his friends Alta and Austin Fife and Hector Lee, he joined a growing group of scholars who made Utah and Mormon culture into a field of folkloristic inquiry unprecedented in the American West.

Although his influence and interests in folklore were national and international in scope, his academic service was almost entirely at the University of California, Los Angeles. After a year as an instructor of German at the University of Minnesota in 1936–37, he moved to UCLA as an instructor and, except for visiting professorships and consultancies around the world, remained at UCLA for his entire career. He served as chair of the Department of Germanic Languages from 1947 to 1950 and as director of the Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, the program he pioneered and championed, from 1961 until his retirement in 1974.

So intense and unremitting was his dedication to the establishment and continuance of this center that he turned down repeated offers from other prestigious universities (including two from Indiana University, where he was wanted as a successor to Stith Thompson). He felt that he was more critically needed at UCLA than anywhere else because he conceived of the program in Comparative Folklore and Mythology as virtually the only American academic program that insisted on training students both in the management of archives and indexes and in the comparative, interdisciplinary perspective to be gained by concentration in a standard academic department. Until the end of his life, he consistently fought against the establishment of folklore as an independent discipline standing apart from other fields. In an interview with Michael Owen Jones, part of the American Folklore Society’s Oral History Project, Hand argued the necessity for “careful training that can come not through folklore itself but through related academic disciplines of long and honorable standing. To reject this broader kind of graduate training is automatically to limit the scope and quality of the student’s work. . . .”

In spite of his seemingly all-consuming tasks at UCLA, he was also an active fieldworker and researcher who felt that analysis and publication of texts were premature if attempted before the researcher had spent many years on the job, in the field, and in the archive. His fieldwork began in the late 1930s and continued unabated; all through the 1940s, ’50s, and early ’60s, he conducted fieldwork with occupational groups, especially miners in Montana, Utah, and California. Some thirty-five years later, one of the men he had interviewed in
Butte, Montana, Kevin Shannon, recalled singing for a man in a bar, a man more interested in the songs than the liquor: “Yeah—that was him all right; recorder and tweed jacket; he couldn’t get enough of those songs!”

At the same time, Hand was equally active in libraries and archives, and he was simultaneously keeping up with international scholarship. He began to urge others to begin publishing their work, to put their archives in order. He took over the compiling of the annual bibliography of folklore published by the Modern Language Association. He kept in touch with scholars and interested hobbyists ranging from callow graduate students to Episcopal vicars, encouraged them to publish, and indeed helped them bring their works into print: at the small end, a note that I wrote on a ballad of the Mountain Meadows Massacre done at Hand’s insistence in 1959; at the big end, magnificent and extensive compendia
such as the last two volumes of the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore (which won him the international Giuseppe Pitè Prize—the first time it had been awarded to an American), the Newbell Niles Puckett volumes of Ohio belief and superstition, and Anthon S. Cannon’s compilation, Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from Utah, which Hand and Jeannine Talley finally saw through to publication in 1984. Whether as editor, coeditor, mover, shaker, middleman, or conscience, Hand was committed to bringing folklore to the attention of the scholarly world.

Because of his unceasing research and writing, it is even more stunning to note his extensive involvement with other dimensions of the world of folklore. In 1946 and 1954, he was associate director (with Stith Thompson) of the famous Folklore Institute of America, then held every summer at Indiana University. From 1947 to 1951, he was simultaneously the editor of the American Folklore Society Memoir Series and the Journal of American Folklore. With the latter, he instituted an “Editor’s Page” and used it to foster extended discussions of current trends in the field by leading folklorists.

During his editorship of the Journal, there was a distinct, unmistakable shift away from anthropological studies and toward the subjects and issues that have made folklore studies distinct in the modern arena. While Hand saw no great divide between the two fields, it is clear from what he published that he was intellectually encouraging the kinds of analysis characterizing the best interdisciplinary perspectives then being developed in folklore. He continued this emphasis as editor of Western Folklore from 1954 to 1966, a period when it became one of the leading serials in the field.

His involvement in academic associations continued; in 1957–58, he was president of both the American Folklore Society and the Modern Language Association of Southern California, and he served as president of the California Folklore Society in 1969–70. During these years, he also served as a prominent and persuasive member of the editorial committee of the University of California Press, sponsored and participated in numerous national and international conferences and seminars, published a series of influential books on his favorite topics (magic, folk medicine, legend, belief), and saw more than 150 articles appear worldwide in several languages.

He was a founding member of the Board of Trustees of the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress and served as its chairman in 1976–77. At the time of his death, he was active as a member of the Board of Directors of the newly established Mountain West Center for Regional Studies at Utah State University. Thus, although he did not much participate in (or savor) the various “critical movements” in folklore scholarship during the 1960s and ’70s, he was personally and professionally involved in those aspects of the field that he considered to be of continuing, central importance. It is not surprising, then, that in the United States he was often referred to as the dean of the old-line gentlemen scholars; his friendly, diplomatic style endeared him to everyone, even those who felt that the old-line scholarship was passé.
The many honors that came to him for this long life of dedicated service are certainly not surprising, considering the depth of his involvement in the field. In 1942, he won the Chicago Folklore Society Prize for his *Dictionary of Words and Idioms Associated with Judas Iscariot*. Over the years, he received two Guggenheim research awards (1952–53 and 1960–61) and other grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Library of Congress, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities (1976–86, in support of his huge project to produce an encyclopedia of American beliefs and superstitions), and the Skaggs Foundation.

In 1976, his colleagues and students at UCLA honored him by naming the folklore collection the Wayland D. Hand Library and again in 1986 with the establishment of the Wayland D. Hand Award for Academic Achievement. In 1981, he was invited to deliver the annual Fife Honor Lecture at Utah State University’s Fife Folklore Conference; with typical modesty and dedication to task, he declined to speak of his own accomplishments and instead presented a comprehensive study of supernatural folklore in Utah based on a lifetime of research and reflection.

His international service and recognition were likewise impressive. He served as visiting professor and lecturer at dozens of universities around the world, including a stint at the University of Chile and frequent visits to the Philippines between 1965 and 1975 to help establish a research program in folklore for the Philippine Ministry of Education. He served as vice-president of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research and was made an honorary lifetime vice-president in 1978. He was also elected a fellow of the Folklore Society of Great Britain and of the Wellcome Museum of London, and in 1972 was made Knight First Class of the Order of the Lion of Finland in recognition of his contributions to international folklore scholarship.

Such a deluge of formal biographical data might give the wrong impression of the kind of person he was in real life. But as those who knew him are well aware, he was a person of rare wit and dignity, a person on whom both an impish smile and a tweed jacket looked natural. He was an indefatigable writer of letters to friends, to colleagues, to university presidents: letters in support of some project or program or conference; letters urging more scholarly work; letters of recommendation; letters that went more than halfway with the subject (“I’ve done a running one-and-a-half back jackknife for you in my letter to X; you’ll be hearing from him soon”).

Like his mentor Archer Taylor, he was a supporter and helper; cards and notes would remind friends of fugitive or foreign-language sources that might be of help on a current project. Phone calls between 4 and 6 A.M. (“Hi! This is W!”) would inform colleagues of new issues, interesting films on TV, upcoming conferences, or threats to the field of folklore. He was a photographer of other folklorists and could hold forth for hours about the personalities captured in his slides, including anecdotes about their specialties, drinking habits, and embarrassing adventures at international border crossings.
Wayland Hand in the archive named after him at UCLA, 1986.

Although he had traveled throughout the world and had lectured in a number of languages, he was almost panicked about public speaking and admitted to close friends that he got butterflies and heart palpitations even when he had only to introduce someone. But with his neighbors, he was completely at home and knew all the children—where they were and what they were doing. On one occasion, leaving his house early one morning, he noticed a number of neighborhood women dressed in their bathrobes, leaning over a backyard fence in earnest conversation. He went back into the house, changed into his bathrobe, and went out to join them.

During the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–80, his coworkers heard a loud scraping sound coming slowly down the hall. Just as they were about to investigate, Hand’s grinning face appeared in the doorway. Behind him was a huge tree branch entirely covered with bows of yellow ribbon. The branch stayed there in the hallway for more than a year as a visible sign of Hand’s hope for freeing the hostages and of his participation in the nationwide exercise of a folk custom.

Wayland Hand was a Utah folklorist not only in his geographical origins but in spirit and interest as well. He had a lifelong fascination with Utah and with Mormon folklore, and even though the vast majority of his publications treated other topics, he expressed his interest in the state’s folklore with articles written both at the beginning and at the end of his career. He was, in fact, instrumental in the founding of the Folklore Society of Utah (see chapter 23), for during a stint of summer teaching at the University of Utah in 1957, he encouraged faculty members Louis C. Zucker, Jack Adamson, Harold W. Bentley, Lester
Hubbard, and William Mulder to form a society. Its first newsletter, published in 1958, excerpted a letter from Hand, part of which said:

Everyone who has collected folklore in Utah has been amazed at the strength of traditions which have endured from pioneer days, and no less at the blending of European and American folk materials. . . . A program of collecting, archiving, and ultimately of publication, I venture to say, should soon put Utah in the forefront of states interested in husbanding their folk traditions. It is in this sense of common cause that your colleagues in other western states salute you for the steps you have taken in effecting a formal organization and getting your work under way.

At the same time that he maintained his interest in and curiosity about the traditions of his native state, most of his work was international in scope and application, for he was equally at home in both arenas, a scholar’s scholar of both the local and the universal. In the brief foreword he wrote for *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones*, edited by Louis W. Attebery, his closing words—delivered in his distinctive Biblical style—may stand not only for the man himself but as one last encouragement to his colleagues and successors: “The field is ripe unto the harvest, the reapers and binders are in the fields, and the day, though weary, is still long” (ix).

This remarkable man was still very active in his profession long after his formal retirement: he was instrumental in arranging a conference on ballads at the Clark Library in Los Angeles in 1983; he helped to edit a book on occupational folklore in 1984; he wrote the single best history of western folklore scholarship in his foreword to *Idaho Folklife* (1985); in 1986, he was helping Utah State University found a center for regional studies and was starting to plan, with Gerhard Heilfurth of Marburg University in Germany, an international conference on mining folklore.

On October 22, 1986, he was on his way to the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Baltimore. He had stopped over at the Wayne State University Folklore Archives, giving advice on their collections and enlisting their aid in the production of his life’s dream, the *Encyclopedia of American Popular Beliefs and Superstitions*, a project growing out of more than forty years of dedicated, stubborn work and now, at long last, under review for possible publication. While making a connection at the Pittsburgh airport, Hand suffered a heart attack and died soon afterward. On the yellow pad he was carrying were some notes he had made on the way to the Detroit airport. At the top was written “Taxicab beliefs from Detroit,” and underneath was a list of four items collected from the cab driver. One of them read, “A driver, fatigued, should pull off the road when he sees a white horse running alongside.”