

FOLKLORE FORUM



A COMMUNICATION FOR STUDENTS OF FOLKLORE

In Memoriam

Archer Taylor

1890 · 1973

I REMEMBER ARCHER TAYLOR

The summer of 1962 was hotter and muggier than any I have ever experienced. As a fresh young graduate student with the first year of folklore studies under my belt, I was eager for all the intellectual stimulation I could get. But I was hardly prepared for the shock of an Indiana summer, especially daily afternoon classes on the west side of Ballantine Hall. The long hot summer of 1962 was the occasion of the quadrennial "Folklore Institute" sponsored by what was then the Folklore Program of Indiana University. Beginning in 1948, every fourth year saw a three to five day conference in midsummer, as well as summer courses offered by renowned visiting scholars.

To native midwesterners or to those who have become acclimatized, summer in Indiana is a pleasant succession of warm and lazy days. But to most of us "foreigners" the oppressive heat made studying impossible. The steamy classrooms of Ballantine and the broiling Folklore library on the top floor of what is now the remodeled (and air conditioned) Student Services Building wilted us all, students and visiting professors alike; all, that is, except Archer Taylor. He always seemed to be as fresh as a California daisy, even though transplanted for the summer to the middle of an Indiana cornfield.

Looking back on that humid summer, I am sure that it was Archer Taylor's consuming intellectual curiosity that enabled him to spend hours with his students in the sweltering Folklore Library. I recall that I was working on a distributional study of the King Guntram legend. Sweat was pouring from my brow as I lugged volume after volume of Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian tale collections to where Archer sat calmly comparing the variants I had discovered. My German was adequate, but it didn't stretch to cover the Scandinavian languages. Professor Taylor generously used his easy familiarity with more than a dozen languages to translate the variants I had found and then to suggest a number of sources in obscure publications of which I was completely unaware. All of this on several torrid afternoons when most men his age would have been taking an extended siesta in air conditioned comfort.

Even as far back as 1962, Archer Taylor was long past retirement age. But he was so excited by the yet unexplored fields in folklore that he could not stop to rest on his abundance of well deserved laurels. His excitement affected us all and, for me, saved the summer.

I recall the heat of that summer, but most of all I recall the unflappable manner in which it was met by the indefatigable resources of a great humanist, dedicated scholar, and sympathetic teacher, Archer Taylor.

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ARCHER TAYLOR

My close acquaintance with Archer Taylor began late in his career, after his retirement from active teaching at Berkeley, when he accepted my invitation to serve on the faculty of the summer folklore institute in 1958. This was just a year after I had myself come to Indiana University to chair the folklore program, and it fell upon me to continue Stith Thompson's tradition of a special summer institute every fourth summer. The first institute had been held in 1942, bringing together the then sparse band of folklore aficionados around the country. I attended the ones in 1946 and 1954, and on finding myself in charge of organizing the next one, turned to Archer Taylor as an illustrious figure whose presence would ensure its success. It did indeed, and he bolstered us again in 1962 when I invited him back for the next quadrennial institute. These two summer-long affairs brought Archer into the midst of our faculty and graduate student body. He loved being in the center of folklore shop talk and everyone loved him. Rather formidable in appearance, a scowling scholar with furrowed cheeks and bushy eyebrows, Archer soon put all at ease with his old-shoe manner and generosity of spirit. In those days we all sat in on each other's classes and seminars -- the institute being a kind of all-day around the clock seminar -- and Archer would lead his two-hour session without pausing a moment, not lecturing so much as launching provocative questions in a discussion that never lagged. A walking bibliography a colleague once called him, and his erudition could have been frightening, except that he dispensed it so graciously. He delighted in aiding students on their papers, guiding them into the stacks, calling their attention to the references that would aid them best, translating for them if need be. He was Doctor Know-All, a master of all the genres, the proverb and the riddle, the folktale and the folksong.

Fond anecdotes gathered around Archer. On one occasion Charles Haywood of Queens College was addressing the seminar in the old folklore library room, and at the end of a high compliment to Archer as the leading authority on the subject in question turned to him with a grandiloquent gesture. All eyes switched to Archer, who was doubled up fast asleep. Yet often when he gave the appearance of dozing during these warm summer symposia he snapped wide awake at the lecture's end and inject a telling comment right on target.

Once you had established a relation with Archer he maintained it firmly through a tenacious correspondence. In a day when nobody has time to write, unless it is to ask for something, Archer wrote continuously to all his colleagues and former students sending bibliographical references and scholarly advice. One day I received five letters from him. He remembered everybody's projects, perhaps even after their sponsors had forgotten them, and kept urging their completion. One came to depend on those scribbled notes, as heart-warming signs of reassurance that someone, who had himself achieved so much, cared about your efforts to achieve.

It was pleasant to see Archer on his home grounds, in Berkeley and at Napa Valley, in the spring and summer of 1968 when I taught at the University of California, to inspect his library and to discuss the past and future of folklore studies. As a folklorist he enjoyed the esteem of the whole academic community, and no one who knew Archer could consider folklore a trifling or frivolous business. He was the noblest kind of scholar, encyclopedia in knowledge, warm of heart, a lover and shrewd judge of books and folks.

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MEMORIES OF ARCHER TAYLOR

For all his genius Archer Taylor was essentially a plain and simple man. Since much will be written about him and his achievements in the world of scholarship and letters, I prefer to give a glimpse of him, if I can, as a husband and father and as a scholar in the unhurried world of his own home. This is not to say that Archer Taylor's professional concerns were entirely left at his office at day's end. Quite to the contrary, he often continued to work at a leisurely pace at home in the evenings, checking a reference here, writing an entry there and attending to things that afforded pleasure rather than requiring deep concentration. These pursuits were generally carried on between reports of what Mrs. Taylor, herself a teacher, had been doing that day and what his two daughters had been up to. At meals and in between times there were always discussions of public affairs in a family on whose reading tables were to be found weekly reviews and other journals of critical opinion, as well as appropriate reading matter for young eyes. Always a proverbial night owl, Professor Taylor did much of his systematic exploratory reading at night after the family had gone to bed, devouring novels, short stories and other kinds of light reading in search of proverbs and other items of folk speech, as well as other kinds of folklore. A mystery novel a night was nothing unusual for him.

In good weather Archer Taylor was outdoors much of the time, attending to a hundred and one things that needed doing on his ranch in the Napa Hills. He loved hard work, whether with a pick and shovel or an axe, and he often philosophized on the benefits to be derived from such physical activity. The picking of prunes or the harvesting of walnuts was the occasion for homilies to his children on the values of work and the satisfactions that came to Longfellow's village blacksmith, "...something attempted, something done,/has earned a night's repose..." Even wood brought in for the fireplace at the end of day was viewed as a benison. It was in front of the hearth, while casually thumbing an antiquarian book catalogue or sipping a glass of wine, that some of Archer's most profound utterances were made. I was present many, many times over the years, either at his home in the Berkeley Hills or at the ranch in Napa when the fire was banked for the night after informal discussions that had touched on almost every conceivable subject. These were experiences for which I shall be everlastingly grateful. The memories of them will always be bright.

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A VISIT WITH ARCHER TAYLOR

Archer Taylor had invited me a number of times to visit him at his ranch in Napa, California. He had drawn a road map to help me to find my way to his hideout. A couple of years ago he suggested that, if I came, we might go over a selection of proverbs in order to find counterparts for them in Slavic languages. Last winter when I learned of the deterioration of his health, I felt that I should not postpone my visit any longer. A good opportunity came this April, when I had to attend a conference at Stanford and San José. I decided to go a couple of days earlier to pay a visit to my old friend.

When the helicopter I had taken from the San Francisco airport landed at Berkeley heliport, I was met by Hasseltine and Archer. It was moving for me to hear that this was Archer's first long trip since his return from the hospital several months before. Archer was brisk, talkative and in good spirits. We drove through Napa Valley, where hills like sugar cones were unusually green for that time of the year; we visited the famous Christian Brothers winery, just a mile or so from Archer's ranch.

The Taylors' house is a big, low stone building on a level clearing at the top of a hill. It had taken six summers for Archer and Hasseltine to build it, aided only by a day laborer. Behind the house still higher hills arise, and from the front a magnificent vista opens over a range of hills to the Napa Valley. Vultures are constantly soaring above the slopes, and occasionally one can catch a glimpse of a deer or a rabbit. It is hard to imagine a more idyllic place for a world-famous scholar to spend the peaceful days of his old age.

It turned out that I had arrived too late to do any serious work with Archer. After breaking his hip and having a stroke, he was confined to the armchair and could move only with difficulty with the help of a walker. He was unable to continue his research, and boxes filled with materials and unfinished manuscripts were heaped on the desk and shelves in his small study. He would sit in his favorite armchair in the big living room for hours, watching TV and reading detective stories. Occasionally he stood up and went to the shelf to get some work on proverbs, or he asked me to bring it to him. It was amazing how he knew the exact location of each work.

Archer remembered well the past events and the persons whom he had met, and he liked to meditate over the bygone years. He told me of his encounters with some old-timers, such as Kaarle Krohn and C. W. von Sydow. He spoke with special warmth of several contemporary folklorists, such as Anna Brigitte Rooth, Matti Kuusi, Stith Thompson, Dick Dorson, Wayland Hand, Carl-Herman Tillhagen and others. During my stay a letter came from Rooth telling them of her appointment to the chair of folklore in Uppsala.

Archer's comments reaffirmed his predilection for a traditional approach to the study of folklore, requiring serious, painstaking work and vast knowledge on the part of the folklorist. However, he did not care for the straw theories of would-be folklorists, nor for the excesses of structuralism, nor for the trends represented by Lévi-Strauss and his followers.

When we were tired of talking, Archer would ask me to browse in his library. This library is unusually large, perhaps more than half the size of a big university's folklore library. Both Archer and Hasseltine thought that they would give away the works in some areas (such as bibliography), in which Archer did not plan to work any more. But to which library should they give them? Some time ago Archer had donated a collection of his books to a private library. Later he had learned that this library had sold books for one or two hundred thousand dollars to obtain funds for installing air conditioning. Archer did not know whether any of his books were sold, but he did not approve of such an action. At this point, I modestly suggested that the Indiana University Folklore Collection would be the ideal repository for his books.

One of the highlights of my visit was a reconnaissance trip of the ranch undertaken in the jeep, the trip that all those who have visited them have taken. Hasseltine handled the jeep expertly on steep slopes and the edges of precipices. Archer was quiet and pensive. Occasionally he would point out some old memorable trees, the springs of the creek that supplied their water and the place where his eightieth birthday party was held a couple of years ago.

When at the end of my visit Hasseltine stood ready to take me to Napa and I said good-bye to Archer, I had the foreboding that this must be our last meeting. Though sad, I left with a feeling of deep satisfaction at having had the privilege of spending a couple of days in interesting discussion -- in the eleventh hour -- with one of the great representatives of the golden era of folklore research, the era when firm foundations for the science of folklore were laid.

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ARCHER TAYLOR

A number of years ago I was asked by a student who was doing a profile of university faculties what man in the world, living or dead, I would most like to emulate. My answer was immediate and spontaneous: Archer Taylor. It is, moreover, interesting to note that this student, a black undergraduate, did not ask "who?" but matter-of-factly wrote down my answer. This prompted me to ask if she knew of whom I spoke, and she replied, "Of course. I was a student in California once and he helped me with translating some German proverbs for a term paper!" Throughout academia students such as she are legion. For if Archer Taylor lived in a book-lined ivory tower, its door was always open and his help was freely given to all who entered.

Whether or not Archer Taylor was a great teacher in the sense in which this phrase is often bandied about today I do not know. I never sat in a classroom with him, and I rather suspect that he was not great in the modern, high-schoolish sense. But he was a great teacher in the sense that all academicians ought to be: like Chaucer's Parson, "...first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte." Those who wished to learn from him had only to ask, and many learned from him who didn't ask -- they merely examined his myriad works and were inspired to seek information themselves by following in his footsteps.

Nor were his lessons restricted to a narrow field. Archer Taylor was a Germanicist, a bibliographer, a student of literatures and, as those of us at Indiana University knew him best, a folklorist. His reputation was solid in Europe, the Americas and Asia. Though he did not take the entire world as his province, those states which he knew well, he knew so well that his word was seldom questioned. If any man ever deserved the title "Doctor of Humane Letters," that man was Archer Taylor.

Archer Taylor was, in short, the proverbial scholar and gentleman. I, like many of his friends throughout the world, will miss his letters, his encouragement and his inspiration. For me, his death means not only the loss of a friend but the end of an era.

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