

THE VI CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH: A STUDENT'S-EYE VIEW

In June 1974 we were sent to the International Folk Narrative Congress in Helsinki as part of the team presenting a report on the revision of Thompson's motif-index. Along with Ruzi Jones of Oregon we found we were the only non-teaching North American graduate students at the meeting, so we thought that other students of folklore would like to hear our impressions of the congress. Rather than give a day by day chronology we have decided to report on the things that seemed most important and interesting to us as graduate students in folklore.

On the whole, the organizers of the congress did an excellent job. However, there was very little in the way of pre-conference preparation. Upon arriving in Helsinki we had to find our way to the Finnish Literature Society Archives, no easy task, and try to elicit such basic information as to where the congress was to be held and when to register. In this aspect the organizers, although both friendly and helpful, were remiss.

In general, the Congress was much better organized than the American Folklore Society meetings. Finnish students and professors had distinctive name tags and were ready to help the participants in any number of languages. All sessions were tape recorded and each session-head had a secretary (a Finnish student) to take notes and help with any mechanical problems that might arise. Most sessions had both reader and commentators which, in theory, should have lead to lively debate. We say "in theory" because, as with AFS meeting, this congress was not well policed. The session heads, with few exceptions, did not demand that the reader or discussant keep to a strict time limit, so that there was rarely time for discussion or questions. Anyone who has attended AFS meetings is familiar with this problem. Although the Congress had most of the papers printed and mailed to the participants in advance--again, in theory, a fine idea--very few participants actually read the papers beforehand.

We were fortunate in arriving several days early and were invited to attend and participate in the International Ballad Conference. We found the participants friendly and open towards what was essentially gate crashing on our part.

We had feared that European scholars might be formal, aloof, or old fashioned, especially in their reactions to two young Canadian graduate students. However, we found nearly all the scholars, from the big-wigs on down, accessible and genuinely interested in us and our work.

The Congress had more of an interdisciplinary flavour than the AFS. There seemed to be a willingness to accept the

conference as a meeting-ground for different studies, such as ethnology, comparative religion, and literature--a change from the American meetings, where most papers aim at defining folklore as a unified discipline, and criticism of theory is often taken personally. Judging from the papers given, European scholars seem to tend more towards structuralism and classification than towards functionalism or aspects of performance and context, but this may be changing. The quality of the papers themselves and the level of attention of the participants were neither better nor worse than at AFS meetings. (For those who have never been to an AFS meeting, this means surprisingly low.) From what we saw, North American scholars need feel neither shame nor superiority in front of their European colleagues.

One of our biggest worries had been the language problem. To our relief, and a little to our embarrassment, we found that, for international scholarship, English is definitely the best language to have. Virtually everyone there had some command of English. However, a knowledge of German, more than French or Russian, would go a long way towards filling any communication gaps. We were impressed by those few North American scholars who were fluent enough in other languages to fill in as translators at difficult spots during the meetings, as well as by European graduate students who managed to maintain their composure while juggling four or five different languages.

We met many Finnish graduate students and were able to compare notes. With a cost of living that approaches Newfoundland's (i.e., very high), Finnish folklore students are kept busy eking out a living. All were asked to help out during the Congress, and most made an effort to keep themselves available to participants. By the end of the week, the students looked tired and harried. The job situation there is worse (if you can believe it) than in North America, with very few openings for folklore teachers. One well-advanced student is teaching in a technical college where he manages to "slip in" some folklore now and then.

Finnish scholarship seems to be influenced, somewhat, by the Russians, and we were surprised to see that Tropp is often mentioned. The Finnish students' familiarity with North American scholarship is about as woefully ignorant as ours is of European scholarship, but everyone there knows of Alan Dundes. The "Finnish method" is now looked upon with some embarrassment by modern-thinking Finnish students, and there is much more interest in popular culture and modern legend than we expected to find.

As in North America, students get part-time jobs as research assistants for established scholars, as well as in archives. We visited one archive in Helsinki--the holdings of the Finnish Literature Society. It was, especially to the North American eye, a very impressive place; there is nothing in North America to

compare with its age, size, and "tradition." Where in North America are there busts and paintings of star informants? The student assistants seemed well-informed and interested in their work, but we found it difficult to discuss, in any detail, the problems of archiving because of the difference in terminology, classificatory systems, and methodologies, as well as the obvious language barrier.

We came away less optimistic about communication with European scholars. The Europeans have huge archiving projects that take up a large part of their time, and it would be unrealistic to suppose that many North Americans will learn a second language, even if (especially if?) their research is being duplicated by a Swede or Finn. However, there is potential for active communication on a personal, scholar-to-scholar level. All it takes is a little extra effort.

From what we gathered, the possibility of North American students studying for a higher degree in a Finnish university is remote, unless that student is fluent in Finnish and has a special interest in Finnish culture. For anyone who is interested in folklore programmes in Scandinavia, see the Nordic Institute of Folklore Newsletter. The newsletter is in progress and completed in Scandinavia. It can be ordered from the Nordic Institute of Folklore, Henrikinkatu 3, 20500 Turku 50, Finland.

On the whole, we found the Congress a good experience. We'd like to publicly thank the Finnish people for making our visit enjoyable, and Memorial University of Newfoundland for making it possible.

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I am making an anthology of 'heartless' or savage verse by children, preferably in the oral tradition. This jump-rope rhyme, for example:

I hope your boys are soldiers
In fancy uniforms
And when they're shot
I hope they rot
In wooden uniforms with no sleeves.

Would readers of Folklore Forum knowing of such material who would care to help kindly write me . Benjamin Sonnenberg
The Overlook Press
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