Conceptional Problems in Writing a History of the Development of Folkloristic Thought

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The Idea of "Philosophical Precursors"

Slowly but surely, twentieth-century folklorists are producing relevant and meaningful works on the history of the study of folklore as a social science discipline and the development of folkloristic thought. However, perhaps too much attention is being given to the nineteenth-century "giants" who helped establish the field as a science, and too little attention is being given to those earlier philosophical precursors who planted the first seeds.

Certainly there have been (1) a number of studies on men such as Vico and Herder who were precursors of many social science disciplines including folklore; (2) various anthropological and pre-anthropological surveys that touch on pre-folkloric themes; (3) several philosophical surveys tracing the history of such themes as progress, primitivism, savagism, nationalism, the noble savage, and German Romanticism, etc. which partially relate to proto-folklore studies; (4) numerous commentaries, usually in passing, on eighteenth-century ballad collecting; and (5) various accounts dealing fully or partially with antiquaries who collected folklore prior to the nineteenth-century. But, other than this, the number of actual studies dedicated completely and exclusively to precursors of folklore research who were active prior to the nineteenth-century are practically non-existent.

At this writing, most of the published works in this vein are primarily about early ballad and folksong scholarship. Hustvedt's assessment of ballad criticism in the eighteenth century, for example, stands out prominently as the most important book-length contribution. Other detailed intellectual histories of early ballad study can be found in works by scholars such as Albert Friedman and Leslie Shepard. Numerous articles about Herder's influence on folksong scholarship are also plentiful. However, the majority of studies on detailed aspects of early folklore research other than folksong have yet to be published. One such work by Francis A. deGaro spends more than 130 pages on antiquaries and antiquary-folklorists prior to the nineteenth century. This present study and two other unpublished manuscripts by Juliana Roth and Juliet Thomas (all of which are, in one way or another, products of a seminar on the history of folklore studies taught by Dan Ben-Amos at the University of Pennsylvania during the Autumn of 1971) are the only other works I know about dealing exclusively with forerunners of folkloristic thought.

Perhaps one reason for such scholarly neglect is the attitude by prominent scholars in the field who seem to find the work of precursors only marginally connected to the actual discipline itself. Instead, they seek the more immediate thrill of describing those men who actually discover or develop the beginnings of scientific folklore research which, shortly thereafter, gains wide attention and support—e.g. the Grimm brothers and their work on *Hänsel and Gretel*. One such scholar is Richard N. Dorson who spends less than forty pages of *The British Folklorists: A History* discussing private scholars and dedicated amateurs of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries dealing with folklore, and only then under the ambiguous distinction of "antiquaries."

Dorson's basic strategy seems to be best summarized by this following statement of his on one of the things folklorists do:
Folklorists properly prize the accomplishments of brilliant theoretical scholars and dedicated collectors who established the science of folklore in the nineteenth century, and drew upon the labors of still earlier antiquaries and traveler-reporters.²

Although de Caro also begins his study with antiquarianism, unlike Dorson he at least spends a considerable amount of time developing the multifaceted historical philosophy and intellectual stimulus behind it and a careful delimitation of its meaning. He finds that the earliest impetus to English antiquarian study was geographic.³ Later, historical considerations (data gathering) prevailed flavored by nationalism. Also involved were the search for accurate knowledge of precedents in law, government, and the overall societal order, a quest which was, of course, related to politics; and the investigation of religious history.⁹

However, de Caro's study is not primarily interested in precursors of folklore research per se. Instead, he is more concerned with one particular conceptualization—the folklore and history relationship, tracing the conception of the veracity of oral lore and the application of folk materials to historical questions in past centuries, with an eye to comprehending how the earlier points of view may have prefigured or influenced our modern understanding of the whole problem.¹⁰

Therefore, his examination of antiquaries is geared specifically in this direction. The result is that antiquarianism as an intellectual movement appears to be somewhat of a failure with a rather ill-defined methodology. The antiquaries collected information on a wide variety of topics because

Firstly, they did not have the perspective to judge the relative importance of data and hence saw everything as, at least potentially, important. Secondly, even when they may have been aware of degrees of immediate relevance, their obvious reverence and love for old artifacts did in all probability lead to uncritical recording of all the information they could discover. Thirdly, their conception of history required such an intimate connection between past and present that they necessarily made loose judgments relating contemporary life to the customs of the past. Finally, in the press of research, they failed to draw major distinctions between written antiquities, and such intangibles as old customs and practices.¹¹

At best, then, the antiquaries only stumbled upon folklore by accident. De Caro sees three reasons for it being included at all. First, it was inevitable by the nature of their basically loose methodology. Second, the antiquaries' love of learning and their enthusiasm for local materials made lore and tradition particularly attractive. And finally, as de Caro emphasizes, "they realized some ways to utilize folklore as an historical document."¹² If anything, this last reason is the only real claim that antiquaries have for being intellectual precursors of folklore research—as early promoters of the folklore and its relationship to history thesis.
By contention is that there is more to the study of proto-folklore scholarship than antiquaries and traveler-reporters. I would like to suggest that we need to examine "philosophical precursors" as well, those men who set the paths for later folklore inquiry even before folklore became a recognized and organized discipline, prior to scientific and methodological rules and principles, or mere collecting. Of course, it must be realized that these men are not directly but are merely indirectly involved with the initial specific research into folkloristics. Thus, they come from other disciplines. Nevertheless, this does not prevent them from anticipating later research within the field of folklore through their own personal endeavors and speculation in basically other concerns.

An Interdisciplinary Topic of Intellectual History

The very nature of such a study must therefore be interdisciplinary. Although the main goal is to deal with matters of extreme importance to modern folklorists, by necessity one must begin with peripheral concerns: concepts about primitivism and progressivism which develop primarily from philosophical inquiry; ideas about folk poetry and folk belief systems which stem from Classical scholarship; and fieldwork methodology which grows out of comparative literary criticism. It is precisely in this very combination of a variety of important interrelated fields wherein emerges the most productive rewards. For it is here, behind the scenes, obscured by what appears to be standard research in areas peripheral to folklore, where rich discoveries are to be found that both aid and abet later folklore inquiry.

Such a study, then, needs to be an "intellectual history" rather than merely a "history," something that a relatively young discipline like folklore must undertake on a much wider scale in the future in order to gain the attention it so richly deserves in its own right. According to Richard Dorson:

Writing the intellectual history of a field of learning and critical biographies of its eminent men and women requires a special technique of library research, value judgments, and the tracing of genetic relationships. In folklore, this kind of history has special rewards, more even than in the history of literary scholarship for tasks of the folklorist are to a large extent cooperative and collaborative and require the contributions of the living as well as the dead.13

General Strategy for Writing an Intellectual History

In reviewing the previous scholarship on the history of folklore, it seems that at least five important factors need to be discussed before a similar undertaking is considered.

First, one particular strategy that is popular is the Nationality approach. Although it might prove to define the discipline in individual countries somewhat narrowly along political and ideological boundaries, I still feel that this approach is essentially a good idea as a first step for eventually putting the whole of folklore research into clearer perspective. After all, ideological manipulation for the purposes of nationalism is the name of the game among countries of the real world. Yet, perhaps the only way to get a truly objective overview is to suspend final judgment until all the accounts of the history of folklore studies of each individual nation are first accumulated and then evaluated collectively.
Although I endorse a nationalistic approach, I suggest that its use be limited to restricted time periods and issues as well as geography and not be applied to sweeping generalities in time and space. Certainly it is true that Herder and romantic nationalism stirred the Grimm brothers in Germany, Asbjornsen and Høe in Norway, Lonroth and the Kroyhs in Finland, Douglas Hyde in Ireland, and the list goes on. But, it is also true that any attempt by one country to evaluate trends of scholarship in all other parts of the world is likely to result in the filtering of ideas through a singularly biased nationalistic looking glass. For example, since Y. A. Scholov's study of Russian folklore is seen through Marxist principles, this affects his evaluation of other countries in the section called "Historiography of Folkloristics." Naturally, only those trends and phases in movements and schools in western Europe that parallel or support the development of Russian folklore scholarship are emphasized. Others are conveniently ignored or omitted altogether.

Secondly, there is always the historiographic problem of how to weigh a personality approach against an issue orientation. Both seem to be popular strategies among scholars and each has its own particular advantages and disadvantages. Focusing only on people in the field is particularly useful for evaluating the complete effect of various individuals on the discipline and keeping personal chronologies in mind, although general overviews on key problems and patterns of research become somewhat obscured. Focusing totally on issues, on the other hand, keeps key problems and patterns of research firmly in mind, adding a clearer dimension to interrelationships among individuals. Perhaps this is better for evaluating trends, establishing overviews, and isolating phases of research, but it is somewhat selective in terms of chronology and the total impact of personalities on the field.

It seems that the best strategy of all is to fully integrate these two parallel approaches for greatest effectiveness. Previous models have not always found the perfect balance. Dorson, for example, may develop some thematic categories or groupings such as antiquity, literary, mythological, society, savage folklorists, and county collectors, but issues are far less developed than is his emphasis on the giants in the field--that "Great Team of English Folklorists" of Lang, Grimm, Nutt, Clodd, Hartland, and Clopton or America's "earlier giants" which include Curtin, Leland, Crane, Sikes, and Evans-Wentz. This "Great Team" and "Giant Man" approach, even strictly on the personality level, often underrates minor but still important "Team members" working directly in the field and giant or little men who work in virtual isolation within the field. Also, it tends to neglect totally those giant or little men in other disciplines whose ideas and contributions filter into folkloristics indirectly. Closer to the desired level of synthesis of personality and issue approaches are studies such as George W. Stocking, Jr.'s look at theories on race, culture, and evolution by American and foreign social scientists in various time periods; or Paulo de Carvalho-Neto's discussion of folklore in terms of pre-logical cultural acts, an idea derived from the works of Tylor, Ribot, Levy-Bruhl, and Freud; or Ellen J. Stekert's investigation of the influence of Tylor's theory of survivals and national romanticism on early American folksong collectors.

A third factor to be kept firmly in mind is the interrelationships between contemporaries and their evolution of ideas, as issues emerge and get debated through time and space. And in the eighteenth century this is a particularly complex problem since many influential works were not published right away because of their revolutionary nature, often remaining locked away in desks unseen
in manuscript form. Such was the case, or example, with Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion as Carl Becker points out. Yet, the religious skepticism that Hume's work helped to foster was already very much in the atmosphere at the time Hume actually composed his Dialogues: "Did they not exert an 'influence'? Yes, indeed. Everybody read them, or, better still, heard their doctrines whispered about."20

Discovering and interpreting such complicated interrelationships and evolution of ideas has not always been adequately handled by history of folklore scholars. But tracing genetic relationships is still important as indicated by Archer Taylor's study of how such clever men as J. G. Von Hahn, Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell unwittingly repeated some of each other's formulations on the biographical pattern of the legendary hero.21

Fourth, there is the conflict of strategies in writing the history of a discipline between a diachronic approach and a paradigmatic approach. The straight diachronic method is basically a chronological one, tracing the development of themes and ideas of the past from the point of view of the past (i.e. in its proper context rather than from an ethnocentric or presentistic bias). Dorson's history of British folklorists follows this basic scheme, explaining the various concepts of individuals in terms of their own major works. This methodology has the advantage of delving into specific ideas in great detail and stressing their continuity. However, it has the disadvantage of playing down divisions within general trends and avoiding elaboration on periods of anomaly and crisis.

The straight paradigmatic approach, on the other hand, as outlined by Thomas Kuhn, would tend to trace only the major periods or trends of Normal Science with their various puzzle-solving activities from phases of stress, anomaly, and crisis to phases of either resolution or revolution.22 The specific ideas of important individual contributors are covered selectively and in far lesser detail than in the diachronic approach. Thus, it seems that the best strategy is to find the perfect balance between these two approaches. Within the basic diachronic method the history of social science scholar must look for so-called paradigms of Normal Science research in order to understand more clearly the dynamics of certain trends—why certain areas of scholars might catch on and develop while others die early or fade from existence only to flourish much later, especially in a study of precursors of an organized discipline involved primarily with pre-paradigmatic activity, but rapidly moving into "that transition to maturity," it is extremely important to isolate the one or two "exemplars" (i.e. concrete problem-solutions which Kuhn hitherto had called "paradigms") that are beginning to emerge from a field of several competing models or schools within the "disciplinary matrix" of the community.23

Finally, there is the strategy of "the Development of the History of Ideas" which Arthur O. Lovejoy revitalised in twentieth-century scholarship:

Though it deals in great part with the same material as the other branches of the history of thought and depends greatly upon their prior labors, it divides that material in a special way, brings the parts of it into new groupings and relations, views it from the standpoint of a distinctive purpose... In dealing with the history of philosophical doctrines, for example, it cuts into the hard-and-fast individual systems and, for its own purposes, breaks them into their component elements, into what may be called their unit-ideas.24
Some of these "unit-ideas" or themes that develop need to be discussed, beginning with those activities that precipitated their inquiry and ending with commentaries on how they were developed in later nineteenth and twentieth-century folklore research.

Conclusion

For a long time it has been recognized that there is a great need for research into the philosophical origins of various branches of social sciences. As John Dewey said in 1929:

These larger ideas within the scope of which social theorizing has been carried on, have as a rule been derived, consciously or tacitly, from some comprehensive view of the universe and man. Here is an enormously rich field of research. There are but few works known to me that trace the philosophical origin of the ideas which have in the past so largely governed special social studies by means of studying the intellectual framework within which the latter are carried on. The philosopher has not as a rule traced the ramifications of his ideas in economics, politics, the writing of history, jurisprudence, or the development of educational theories; workers in the latter fields have often taken current ideas ready made, and omitted to ask for their source in prior philosophic speculation, and to consider the degree in which they are affected--or infected--by that origin.25

Of course, since Dewey's statement, slowly but surely, studies have emerged on the philosophic foundations of modern economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. It is now time for folklore to do the same and take its place firmly alongside other more established social science disciplines.

Notes


8. de Caro, p. 28.

9. Ibid., pp. 30, 34.

10. Ibid., p. 11.

11. Ibid., pp. 49-50.

12. Ibid., p. 53.


20. Ibid., p. 75.


