

Henry Glassie

We celebrate the promise that Henry Glassie, the author of many of the most influential books in folkloristics, will, despite his retirement, continue to be a productive field-worker, writer, mentor, and disciplinary leader.

Born in 1941 in Washington, D.C., Henry comes from a family with deep Southern roots. Affection for the places, peoples, histories, and cultures of the American South, in profound tension with his belief in the necessity of change in a society characterized by racial injustice, provided the early catalyst from which a long and productive career as an activist and engaged student of humanity would grow.

Henry consistently describes the unfolding of his career in terms of his major fieldwork projects. The keystone works in the period that runs from his teenage years through the 1970s are *Pattern in the Folk Material Culture of the Eastern United States* and *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*. These transformational studies of cultural history in Eastern North America greatly expanded scholarly knowledge of the region while offering general models for both historic-geographic (in *Pattern*) and structural (in *Folk Housing*) analysis of artifacts. This period saw Henry move through his degrees at Tulane University (English and anthropology), the Cooperstown Graduate Program (folk culture), and the University of Pennsylvania (folklore).

The nature of Henry's fieldwork shifted when he began a decade-long project focused intimately on life in a small community on the border in Northern Ireland. The many fruits of this work have permanently reshaped the humanistic social sciences. The American geographer Wilbur Zelinsky called Henry's ethnography *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* "one of the most remarkable pieces of literature of the

twentieth century." Such praise is far from idiosyncratic. In a time of horrifying sectarian violence, Henry's Irish work demonstrated the power of love, faith, and historical consciousness to give meaning and structure to a community in which Catholics and Protestants together grappled with wrenching social change. After a span of 34 years, Henry revisited his Irish work in his most recent book, *The Stars of Ballymenone*.

From a tiny corner of Northern Ireland, Henry shifted his attention in the 1980s to the arts of a bustling nation. While his earlier work had focused on cultural forms that were often understood to be disappearing, Turkey was a place in which the traditional arts were reaching new heights of excellence on a vast scale. His massive ethnographic endeavor became a major museum exhibition and the monumental book *Turkish Traditional Art Today*. Testifying to its impact, the study was named a noteworthy book of the year by the *New York Times*. In demonstrating the excellence of contemporary traditional art, the book singlehandedly upended an elite discourse that insisted that Turkey's artistic greatness was a matter of the distant past.

The progression that began in Protestant America, led to Catholic Ireland, and was followed by Muslim Turkey, brought Henry next to Bangladesh, where Hindu and Muslim artists shared the complexity of their arts and culture with him. The Bangladesh decade resulted in *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, a book that the nation's leaders prompted him to write so that their country could benefit from the same kind of comprehensive survey that Henry had pursued in Turkey. Overlapping with his work in Bangladesh in the 1990s was the beginning of his project on Japanese ceramics, which he is currently pursuing in collaboration with folklorist Takashi Takahara. In turn, the Japan period has overlapped with the start of his nearly completed artistic biography of Nigerian artist Prince Twin Seven-Seven. As this project connected to the religion of the Yoruba people nears completion and he prepares to finish his study of a key art in a Shinto and Buddhist society, Henry

and his beloved wife, Pravina Shukla, are beginning work in Brazil, where art and religion are rooted in a distinctive mixture of African, European, and Native American traditions.

While Henry has been closely associated with performance-centered and folklife approaches in folkloristics, consideration of his oeuvre reveals a deep commitment to a humanistic comparative method in which the intersection of religion and art has provided a common denominator for a global assessment of the human condition. Such considerations are most overt in his stocktaking works, including *Material Culture* and *The Spirit of Folk Art*. Recurring themes in Henry's research include the socially integrative power of vernacular cultures, the ramifications of faith, the cross-cultural nature of art, the role of the individual in community, and the lived experience of history.

Prior to finishing his doctorate, Henry had already taken up work as one of the nation's first public folklorists, serving as Pennsylvania's state folklorist. After a year teaching at Pennsylvania State University, Henry joined Indiana University's Folklore Institute in 1970. He was promoted to associate professor in 1972. In 1976 he returned to the University of Pennsylvania, where he became professor and chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife, the program from which he had earned his doctorate only seven years before. Henry was happily lured back to Indiana's storied folklore program in 1988, when he was offered a College Professorship, the distinguished rank that he now carries into emeritus status. Continuing the work that he began as a state folklorist and as a civil rights activist, Henry has remained committed to public folklore practice: building exhibitions, doing historic preservation work, participating in folklife festivals, and working on applied projects throughout his busy career.

Henry is proud of his four children and three grandchildren and looks forward to seeing them in between new research trips with Pravina. When in Bloomington, the couple intend to enjoy their beautiful, art-filled home and to host the many visiting artists and scholars who are drawn to campus by the folklore program to which Henry has given so much.

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Henry Glassie

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