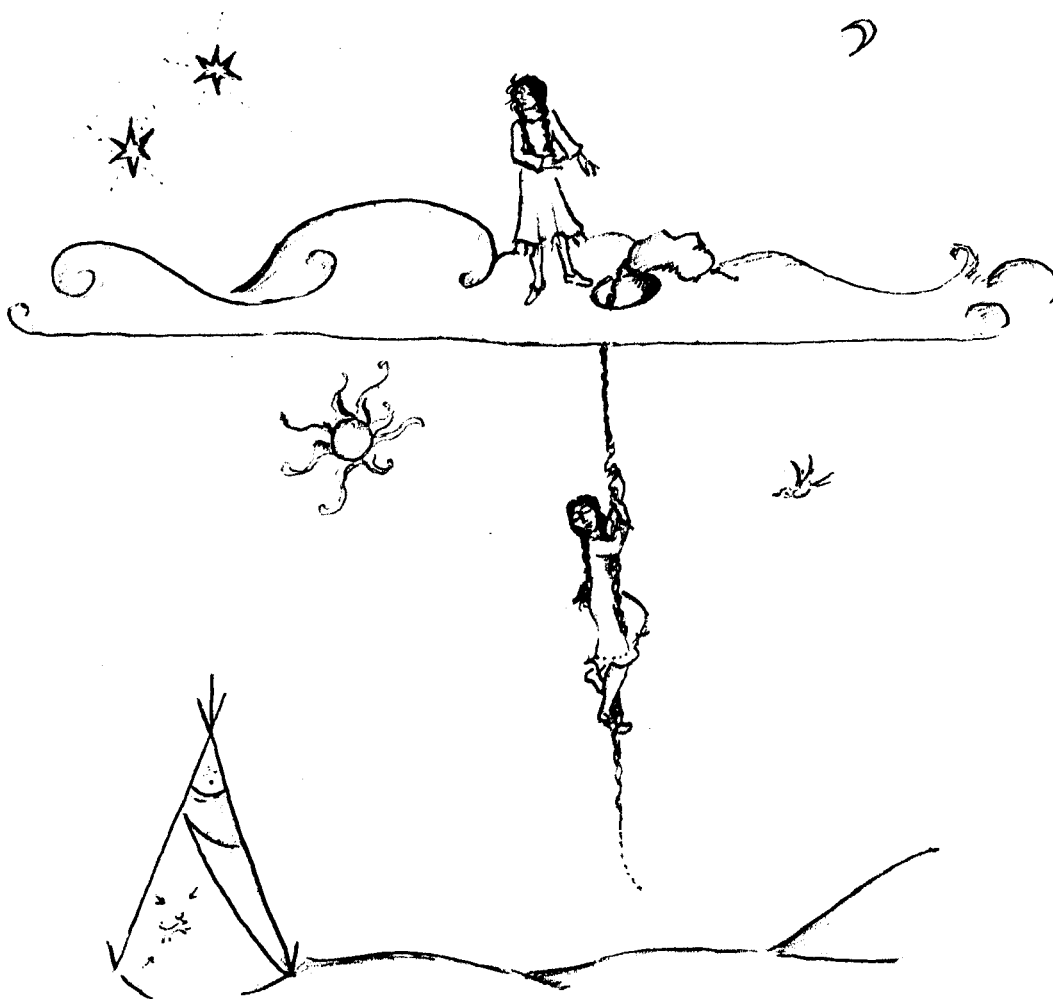


Stith Thompson: His Life and His Role in Folklore Scholarship

PEGGY MARTIN



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VOLUME 2

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STITH THOMPSON:
HIS LIFE AND HIS ROLE
IN FOLKLORE SCHOLARSHIP
WITH A BIBLIOGRAPHY

PEGGY MARTIN

FOLKLORE MONOGRAPH SERIES
FOLKLORE PUBLICATIONS GROUP
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

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HIS LIFE AND HIS ROLE
IN FOLKLORE SCHOLARSHIP

Editor's Foreword

With the publication of this study of the life and works of Stith Thompson, the editors of the Folklore Publications Group are pleased to mark the initiation of the new Folklore Monograph Series. It is particularly appropriate that the man who earned the reputation as the "father of American folklore" should be the subject of this first Monograph issue. As the founder of the folklore program at Indiana University, Thompson's enormous organizational energies and activities laid the groundwork for the development of the Folklore Department and Folklore Institute to the present status of a major center for folklore research and scholarship in the United States. In a very real sense, the Folklore Publications Group owes its existence and continued support to Thompson's living legacy of folklore study at Indiana University.

This paper had its origins in a graduate seminar conducted by Prof. Richard M. Dorson at the Folklore Institute during the spring semester of 1976. Each participant in this seminar contributed a paper dealing with the life and works of a folklorist of contemporary or historical importance. While there is certainly no lack of primary and secondary source materials concerning Thompson and the historic-geographic method of which he was a major proponent, Martin's study represents a unique addition to the literature of this field in several ways. The extensive bibliography which she has included here assembles, in convenient chronological order, Thompson's major writings on folklore, and should prove an invaluable aid to every student of folklore, the folktale, and of Thompson himself. Furthermore, in pursuing an essentially biographical approach to Thompson's academic career, Martin offers the reader a glimpse at the man behind the methods, placing Thompson's scholarly output in the contemporary context of his own life and times, and providing an introductory survey of the ideas and personalities of this period in the history of the discipline, in which Thompson stood as a leading international figure.

This biographical perspective is made even more vivid by drawing upon a number of previously unavailable documents in Thompson's personal collection, which he donated to the Lilly Library at Indiana University in 1972. These papers, housed in the permanent manuscripts collection of the Lilly Library, include Thompson's letters, diaries, official correspondence, notes, manuscripts, programs, photographs, and geneological data, and are now available to the scholarly community. Since the completion

of Martin's paper, the Thompson collection has been catalogued according to correspondent, subject, and type of document. The 298 entries in the index of correspondents alone give an indication of the richness of the holdings as a potential source of materials for future scholarly investigations. The author and editors are grateful to the staff of the Lilly Library for their cooperation in granting access and permission to use the Thompson papers.

As a final, and more personal, note, I had the privilege of meeting Professor Thompson at his home in Columbus, Indiana in November 1975, just several months before his death the following January. At the age of ninety, Thompson remained lucid and as enthusiastic as ever, and he reminisced freely and in remarkable detail on the events, issues, and colleagues in his long professional career. Since his retirement twenty years before, he had continued to keep abreast of subsequent developments in the discipline he had helped to establish; and with the voice of unquestionable experience, he once again warned against uncritical acceptance of current trends in folklore until they have been substantiated by fact. But most of all, I value Thompson's sincere words of encouragement to the younger generations of folklorists, and his pride in knowing that the work which he began over half a century before would not be forgotten. This paper stands as a modest tribute to the man and his dedication, one which we hope Dr. Thompson would have been honored to receive.

John M. O'Hara

Author's Note

This paper discusses the life, writings, and contributions to scholarship of Stith Thompson, focusing on his study of folklore, his contributions to the establishment of a scholarly foundation for folklore studies, and his efforts to organize folklore and folklore scholarship on an international basis. The information given and theories expressed include those of Stith Thompson as found in his books and recollections, the statements of several writers about him, and my own opinions as derived from the above sources. No attempt is made to present in full the information available about Thompson, but instead to select information most relevant to students of folklore. Ideally, the paper should serve as an introduction to Thompson's bibliography and writings, and references are made to works in which readers can obtain further information on particular topics.

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The Life of Stith Thompson

Stith Thompson did not begin his training as a folklore scholar, but rather as a teacher of English and composition. Nonetheless, certain events and predispositions in his early life contributed to the development of his folklore interests.

1. Childhood and Early Schooling

Stith Thompson was born on March 7, 1885 in Nelson County, Kentucky, the son of John Thompson and Elizabeth McClaskey. His heritage was a mixture of Scotch-Irish, Welsh, French, English, Dutch, and German ancestry.¹ Thompson became interested in his family history as an adolescent and continued geneological research throughout his life; perhaps this interest served as his introduction to the techniques and resources of research. His father pursued several alternate trades and interests--as a distiller, a livestock trader, a county judge--and the family's financial situation fluctuated. As a result, Thompson worked at various odd jobs during his youth. He attended grade school at Pleasant Grove and at Springfield, Kentucky--years which he looked back upon with some fondness, as evidenced by the commencement programs preserved in his papers (Lilly Collection). He recalls in his autobiography that he established himself early as a studious young man, but not as an athlete.²

In 1897 the Thompson family moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, partly to improve their finances and partly to obtain better education for their son.³ Two particularly important events of his high school years influenced Thompson's career decisions. Although he entered the Manual Training High School in the manual arts, his dissatisfaction with this curriculum caused him to make the decision to enter the liberal arts program instead, which instilled in him his first desire to become an English teacher.⁴ There is an essay in his personal papers (Lilly) written in 1903, describing his friends and teachers at the school. From its romantic style, one would think that those comrades were the most outstanding people he could ever hope to meet, although in all his writings he preferred to emphasize the positive traits of his associates. In 1902, however, Thompson took a job in the shipping rooms of the Bobbs-Merril Publishing Company in Indianapolis, where he chanced to meet and be impressed by such prominent literary figures as James Whitcomb Riley and Booth Tarkington.⁵

2. University Training

After two years of education at Butler College in Indianapolis, where he learned classical Latin and Greek literature, Thompson returned to Springfield, Kentucky, where he taught high school English for two years at \$405 a year--the experience was more beneficial than the pay.⁶ With a budding interest in modern drama, Thompson finished his undergraduate training at the University of Wisconsin, where, under the stimulation and advice of Professor Arthur Beatty, he learned French and German and did his first folklore research. At that time folklore study in the United States was slight, except for the literary study of ballads--which were not perceived to be folklore anyway--and the anthropological work being done on the North American Indians. Beatty prompted Thompson's folklore interests in at least three ways. First, in a ballad course Beatty instructed Thompson to locate the narrative songs of primitive peoples of North America and Africa. When his student returned, disheartened, and reported that he had not been able to find any, Beatty conceded that Thompson had actually found what he was supposed to find: that there were none.⁷ Second, Beatty instilled in him a scepticism for the then current communal theory of ballad origins.⁸ Finally, Thompson wrote his Bachelor of Arts thesis, "The Return from the Dead in Popular Tales and Ballads," under Beatty's direction (this work will be discussed below). Thus he began the folktale research which led to his later recognition of widespread types and motifs. Beatty, until his death, remained an advisor to Thompson. In a letter to Archer Taylor dated September 25, 1925 (Lilly) Thompson reported that he had discussed Kaarle Krohn's proposal to revise Aarne's folktale index with Beatty before replying to Krohn.

Stith Thompson then took off another two years to teach high school English, this time in Portland, Oregon. During this period he taught himself Norwegian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, and Russian, and he spent a summer in a lumber camp.⁹ Here, in one of his few experiences with living folklore, Thompson heard the oral Paul Bunyan cycle from the lumberjacks.¹⁰ In 1911 he received a fellowship to do graduate work in English at the University of California, where he studied with Walter Morris Hart, an advocate of the communal origin of the ballad, and C.M. Gayley, whom he recalls as being the best teacher he ever had.¹¹ Thompson became interested in Positivist writers here also, and developed his philosophical and theological principles.¹² For his Master's thesis he continued work

on the motifs of the return of the dead, thereby expanding his familiarity with folktales; the thesis was entitled, "The Idea of the Soul in Teutonic Popular Ballads and Literature."

A Bonnheim Research Fellowship enabled Stith Thompson to go to Harvard to complete his Ph.D. studies with the noted ballad scholar, George L. Kittredge. Thompson later wrote that Kittredge was a competent teacher but not really a folklorist, and that he tended to be patronizing to his students.¹³ Three developments in Thompson's Harvard training seemed to be particularly important to his life and career. First, with Kittredge's suggestions and support he researched and wrote his dissertation on "European Tales Among the North American Indians." Second, through these researches, he began to distinguish and collect European tale types and motifs. In fact, he repeated some of the work Antti Aarne had done in his Verzeichnis der Märchentypen (1910), which was in the Harvard library, unknown to Kittredge and Thompson.¹⁴ Third, Thompson met Archer Taylor, another outstanding figure in American folklore scholarship. They began a lifetime friendship with a trip to Europe together in 1913. The letters from Taylor dating back to the Harvard years are contained in a thick folder in the Lilly Collection.

3. Early Career

Letters in Thompson's personal papers reveal that he received several teaching offers after his graduation from Harvard in 1914, but he chose to go to the University of Texas at Austin, where he taught English composition. He rented a room in the home of John Lomax, thus beginning many years of association with John and, later, Alan Lomax. Lomax encouraged Thompson to attend a meeting of the Texas Folklore Society, at which the new member was immediately made Secretary-Treasurer. Thompson edited the first publication of the Society with financial aid from Barrett Wendell.¹⁵ This was his first involvement with folklore organization, the publication of journals, and committee work. During these four years he published four English composition texts, establishing an academic reputation which was to open up new opportunities for him.¹⁶ Finally, he married Louise Faust in 1918. She seems to have been a bright and supportive woman. Besides raising two daughters, Dorothy and Marguerita, she accompanied him on his travels and kept detailed diaries.

Understandably, Thompson wrote little about his private or emotional life in his recollections except for the description of certain emotionally-charged events which influenced his career, such as his friendships with Taylor

and Lomax. Nonetheless, his reminiscences do convey a feeling for the delights, pressures, and uncertainties of a young scholar. Thompson also placed a high value on social contacts, club involvement, and the informal exchange of information. Laurens Mills asserts that Thompson had "the social vigor of the Blue Grass."¹⁷ Certainly, this vigor was an asset in the creation and maintenance of his tremendous network of friends, acquaintances, and associates.

In 1918 Thompson moved to Colorado College at Colorado Springs. For the first few months of the school year he rewrote and condensed his dissertation, which had been rejected by Harvard University Press because of its excessive length; he also reorganized it with the aid of the notes of Bolte and Polivka. This was finally published in 1919 by Colorado College under the title, European Tales Among the North American Indians, and its acceptance by anthropologists and folklorists earned him a place in Who's Who and encouraged him to continue his concentration on folklore--a turning point, so to speak, in his career.¹⁸

Because of poor faculty relations at Colorado, Thompson accepted a position in English at the University of Maine at Orono for one uneventful year.¹⁹ On the way to Maine, however, he stopped at the Harvard University library and discovered a copy of Aarne's Verzeichnis der Märchentypen, which he copied by hand, with great regrets for not having utilized it for his dissertation.²⁰ While at Maine, Thompson received an offer from Indiana University asking him to become Director of Freshman English. He accepted and moved to Bloomington in 1921, beginning a thirty-four year career there.

4. Years in Indiana and Major Folklore Research

With the support of President William Lowe Bryan, Thompson reorganized the Freshman Composition staff, remaining with this task until 1937. Although the bulk of his work was still in English Literature, Thompson began to teach folklore courses in Bloomington and Indianapolis in 1923.²¹ During these early years he also began his collection of motifs, inspired by his dissertation research, and his survey of representative North American Indian tales for his book, Tales of the North American Indians (1929).

A 1926 article by one of Thompson's students, Robert E. Harris, describes him as the "Archdeacon of Comma Hounds," an ardent advocate of meticulous scholarship, and a kindly friend to his students. "He transmits to

students his own buoyant scholarship and enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge, and instills in them thereby that desire for intellectual development which is the basis for all learning."²²

By 1925 Thompson had completed his first 400-page Motif-Index manuscript, which included motifs taken from the folklore of Europe and the North American Indians. Archer Taylor encouraged him to expand the scope of the work, but took a copy of it with him on a visit to Kaarle Krohn in Finland in 1925. Thompson's correspondence collection includes the letters that Taylor wrote back to Thompson from Finland, giving Krohn's criticisms of the draft (which will be discussed below) and his suggestion that Thompson might be the scholar with the interest and ability to translate and expand Aarne's Verzeichnis.²³ Thompson agreed to lay aside his motif research and planned a year in Europe for 1926-27 to revise the index. The importance of this trip should be emphasized; Thompson met a number of prominent European folklorists, thereby beginning a lifelong correspondence and exchange of ideas and facts with the major scholars of his field. He also had an inspiring meeting with Kaarle Krohn and Johannes Bolte in Copenhagen. He regarded these men as the greatest folklorists of the time; both were extremely knowledgeable and they encouraged the efforts of younger scholars. Krohn, then an old man, repeated to Thompson the words that Reinhold Köhler had used when expressing his selection of Krohn as his successor, and asked that Thompson remember them. "It can well be imagined that the confidence he expressed has stayed with me all through the years," wrote Thompson at the age of 71.²⁴

After completion of the revised index, The Types of the Folktale, Thompson returned to Bloomington to teach and continue his motif research. He also began collecting folklore books for the Indiana University Library at this time. In 1931 he spent another summer in Europe, renewing acquaintances and making new ones, and doing library and archive research for his motif collection.²⁵ The University supported his work during the Depression, and in 1935, at the age of 50, he completed the final drafts of the first edition of the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. During the 1930's students from the United States and abroad began to come to Indiana University to study folklore with Thompson, many of them later to establish themselves firmly in folklore studies and to disseminate the methods and theories that Thompson taught.²⁶ Finally, Thompson began work on his final English textbook, completed in 1940--Our Heritage of World Literature. The book was conceived and written to fill the need for a comprehensive college text for a class he was teaching.²⁷

By the time that the Motif-Index appeared, Stith Thompson's reputation as a folklorist was international, bringing fame to the man and to Indiana University. Thompson perpetuated this reputation by his trips abroad to attend meetings and conferences. In 1935 he was invited to attend a Folktale Congress in Lund, Sweden, as one of twenty-five folktale specialists; upon his arrival he was introduced to the Swedish people by the press as the "Linnaeus of Folklore."²⁸ This conference was Thompson's first international conference and his introduction into formalized international organization and committee work.

This Congress was followed by two more in 1937, at Edinburgh and at Paris, at which he was able to obtain feedback on his own work and promulgate the worldwide comparative study of the folktale, which he believed to be essential to folklore efforts. Thompson also lectured in Dublin, Ireland, in the summer of 1937, and he accompanied Seamus O'Duillearga on a field trip to record Gaelic storytelling in the Irish countryside. This was his second memorable experience with living folklore, the first having been his summer with the Oregon lumberjacks. Because of the popularity of the Arne-Thompson type index, he was mistakenly addressed by the Irish as "Dr. Arne Thompson." Finally, from 1936-39 Thompson was President of the American Folklore Society.

In March of 1939 Thompson received a substantial offer from New York University to direct the English department there. He seriously considered accepting the offer, but in a letter now found in the Lilly Collection Archer Taylor strongly dissuaded Thompson from the ills of city life and from graduate level teaching. Herman B Wells, then President of Indiana University, heard about the offer and proposed an alternative--an increase in salary; research and conference support, annual funds for the purchase of folklore books and for the establishment of a special series of folklore publications; and a promotion to the first Professorship of English and Folklore in the United States.²⁹ In a statement delivered at a memorial service following Thompson's death, Wells remarked that his decision to keep Thompson was one of the best decisions he ever made during his own career at Indiana University, for Thompson's reputation enhanced that of the school which supported him.

Four developments in Thompson's life in the 1940's were particularly important. First, from 1941-46 he wrote a survey of the folktale and folktale scholarship --The Folktale (1946)--which developed out of a seminar

he taught known as "The Folktale and Allied Forms."³⁰ Second, in 1942 he organized the First Summer Folklore Institute, a gathering of folklore students and scholars in Bloomington. The Institute was held every four years for the next two decades. Third, in 1947 he was invited by the Venezuelan Ministry of Education to establish a Folklore Service in Caracas. Thompson, his wife, and daughter spent a year in South America, visiting folklorists and museums, lecturing, collecting material for the Library of Congress, and establishing a successful and comprehensive program of folklore collecting and classification in Venezuela. By acquainting himself with the folklore research of South America, making the information available in publications, and corresponding with the folklorists there, Thompson helped coordinate their efforts with those of North American and European folklorists.³¹ He returned to South America to attend international conferences in 1954 (Sao Paulo) and in 1960 (Buenos Aires). On the latter visit he conducted a four-month lecture tour sponsored by the U.S. State Department, and checked on the progress of the Venezuelan Servicio.

Finally, Thompson received a letter from President Wells while still in South America, offering him the Deanship of the Graduate School at Indiana. Thompson accepted the position with the condition that he be given an assistant for his research (Jonas Balys of Estonia), and held it until 1950. Among other things, Thompson established a graduate student resident hall, established the Ph.D. program in folklore at the University, and helped institute the Indiana University Press.³³

In 1950 Thompson held the Midcentury Folklore Congress in Bloomington--a combination of the Summer Institute, the American Folklore Society, and the International Folk Music Council. He managed to obtain the money to bring several European folklorists to Indiana to join in the four symposia on collecting, archiving, studying folklore, and making it available to scholars and to the public. The discussions of the conference were published as Four Symposia on Folklore in 1953.³⁴ Here, too, Thompson felt that the informal conversations were of greatest benefit, though certainly the published discussions touch upon crucial past and present issues in folklore scholarship.

Thompson published a revision of the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature from 1955-58, with the aid of Balys and several other research assistants. He attended more international conferences and meetings in the 1950's, immersing himself in committee work (including a position on the International Commission of Folklore and the

Performing Arts), public lectures, frequent meetings of U.S. societies, and continuing supervision of students, collections, monographs, and indexes. In 1951-52 he was a Fulbright lecturer in Oslo.³⁵ He was named Distinguished Service Professor of English and Folklore in 1953, and in 1955, at the age of 70, he retired from teaching at Indiana University. He hardly retired from work, however; from 1956-57 he spent a year in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, researching archives to revise the Types of the Folktale--thirty years after his first European folktale research.

Thompson continued to accept some summer teaching positions at various universities through the 1960's, and he continued to publish journal and encyclopedia articles. In 1958 he published (with Jonas Balys) The Oral Tales of India, and in 1960 Types of Indic Folktales (with Warren Roberts). These indexes were the result of twenty years of intermittent research on the folktales of India.³⁶ While attending the organizational meeting of the International Association for Folk-Narrative Research in Kiel in 1959, Thompson received a fifth Honorary Doctorate of Letters.³⁷

In 1968 Thompson published his last book, One Hundred Favorite Folktales, a systematic compilation of selected folktales. This is the least scholarly of any of his works; many major folktale areas were omitted, and only marginal data about distribution were included.³⁸ In the summer of 1961 he taught at the University of Hawaii, and attended the Pacific Scientific Congress in Honolulu.³⁹ By the 1960's the Folklore Institute had become a year-round program, directed by Dr. R.M. Dorson, and Thompson took no great part in it.

There is little information available about his last years, except that he spent them in a nursing home in Columbus, Indiana, and that his health failed dramatically after his wife died. He made occasional trips to Bloomington to visit with folklorists and friends there. Thompson died on January 10, 1976 at the age of 90.

Before concluding the discussion of Thompson's life, a word should be said about the two privately multigraphed volumes of his reminiscences, Folklorist's Progress (1956) and Second Wind (1966). Not only do they contain a wealth of information and autobiographical data, but they offer exciting insights into the interactions of folklorists in Europe and the Americas. Thompson wrote in detail about the dinners, meetings, library conversations, and the like with folklore friends and

associates, gradually elaborating through personal experience the expansion of folklore collection, research, and methodology during the first sixty years of the twentieth century.

Thompson's Major Folklore Publications

1. Theses and Dissertations

Stith Thompson's earliest folklore writings were his Bachelor of Arts (Wisconsin 1908) and Master of Arts (California 1912) theses. In the former, "The Return of the Dead in Popular Tales and Ballads," Thompson followed the evolutionary anthropological ideas of the era, stating that people of the same stage of cultural development have the same ideas about the dead. These beliefs may persist into a later stage of culture as "fossils." Thompson selected at random folktale and ballad motifs which he thought indicated a belief in temporary or permanent return from the dead, the latter being a more ancient belief. He seems to have fitted his data to his speculations; but, nonetheless, the thesis represents extensive research on folktales and their elements.

"The Idea of the Soul," written in 1912, was limited to a survey of Teutonic folklore; even so, the treatment was rather broad. A letter from Arthur Beatty in the Lilly Collection dated 1912 suggests that, indeed, Beatty felt the topic to be too broad, but the idea to be a good one, for such a treatment had not yet been done. One can see a refinement in the speculations of the earlier thesis, though Thompson continued to uphold the idea that the ballad was a later form than the tale, probably composed from folktale elements. He was much more cautious in his generalizations, stating that "Any definite generalization as to folk belief by the consideration of multitudes of points gathered from a great collection of tales is open to some criticism."⁴⁰ This is among the first of many statements Thompson was to make in his books and articles warning against overgeneralization from insufficient data. Although he was an advocate of comparative folklore studies, he believed that comparisons should not be made until individual items are thoroughly studied.

When G.L. Kittredge read a letter in a ballad class from an anthropologist who had collected what he believed to be a European tale from the North American Indians, Thompson's interest was sufficiently stimulated to lead him to research such tales for his dissertation. In the process of researching and becoming familiar with European and North American Indian tales, Thompson began his collection of motifs, and essentially repeated some of the work which Aarne had already done for his

index of Northern European tale types. In the dissertation, which was published as European Tales Among the North American Indians in 1919 and as an article called "Sunday School Stories Among Savages,"⁴¹ Thompson concluded that the French had contributed the greatest number of tales to the North American Indians, followed by the Spanish, the Negroes, and the English. He also pointed out the essential stability of most of the Old World tales in the New World, but noted that some of them had undergone processes of integration into tribal lore, which should be studied--a foreshadowing of the processes he was to be concerned with in connection with historic-geographic studies. Warren Roberts, in a review of the published book in 1965, asserted that the dissertation has remained a basic folklore and anthropology research tool.⁴³

2. Writings Concerning Primitive Folklore

Tales of the North American Indians was partially an outgrowth of Thompson's dissertation, fulfilling a need he recognized for a systematic, representative collection of North American Indian folktales from all the culture areas.⁴⁴ In his introduction, Thompson surveyed previous work done by anthropologists and amateurs in collecting the tales, and he provided comments about the nature of the lore in the various areas. He observed that genre boundaries in primitive tales are weak, and that explanatory elements may be added at a later telling. Thompson included trickster tales, hero tales, creation myths, and stories of otherworld journeys and of animal wives and husbands, in their best-told versions; he added comparative notes and inserted motif numbers which coincided with those of the Motif-Index. Archer Taylor, reviewing the book, agreed that it met all reasonable demands for a survey, representing a compromise between the demands of the public and those of scholars.⁴⁵ Other reviewers have pointed out that tales from the Southern Plains, Southern California, and the Southwest were underrepresented.⁴⁶

A word may be added here concerning Thompson's ideas about primitive folklore, though they are not exclusive of his ideas about folklore in general. Most of primitive culture belongs in the province of ethnology and anthropology; primitive art and music need special attention.⁴⁷ Storytelling, however, is universal. There is a continuum from primitive to sophisticated literature, and elucidation of the process of development, Thompson felt, is a major goal of folklore study.⁴⁸ Not only the native folklore, but the integrated lore borrowed from higher cultures should be considered; studies of individual items, their probable origin and distribution should precede comparative studies and theoretical evaluations of

style, function, and performance.⁴⁹ Thompson repeatedly emphasized that type indexes should be made of the Pacific area, the North and South American Indians, and Africa, and his students did indeed begin indexing work in these areas.

Thompson's first article about primitive folklore, "The Prehistoric Origins of Satire" (1916) was rather an embarrassment to him later. Satire, he stated, was the product of an irrational savage mind, a prelogical mentality, and was actually a poetic form of the curse.⁵⁰ As Thompson's knowledge of folklore increased and matured, he altered his estimation of primitive mental processes, particularly in regard to myth. He later believed that myth-making processes have not changed from primitive to modern people. One must consider a culture's own definition of its myths, just as we have worked out our own genre distinctions for Western folklore.⁵¹ Thompson did not think that folklorists knew enough about the origin and dissemination of myths to speculate on the nature of mythology. He frequently described psychoanalytic, ritualistic, and dream theories of myth as nonsense. One cannot fit a broad range of material into a single mold. Myth means what it says; the quest for outside meanings is doomed to failure.⁵²

3. Indexes

A. The Types of the Folktale

The request made of Thompson by Krohn to revise Aarne's type index has already been mentioned. Krohn realized that the amount of material published since the index had been written necessitated an expansion and revision. Aarne died before being able to continue the task, and Thompson was asked to do so. He translated the index from Finnish into English, expanded the material from Northern European collections to include Southern and Eastern Europe, Great Britain, and, to a lesser extent, India. He made use of the notes of Bolte and Polivka, Reidar Th. Christiansen's survey of Norwegian tales, and other similar recent works.⁵³

"Type," said Thompson, is a "term used by students of folk literature to designate a narrative capable of maintaining an independent existence in tradition." The version given in the index was not selected according to aesthetic criteria of good and bad, but is rather a theoretical reconstruction of the probable archetype of the tale for use in a practical listing and catalogue of tales. The indexing process, then, implies a basic assumption that a tale is an entity with a history and an origin.⁵⁴ More will be said about archetypes in the

discussion of the historic-geographic method below. Thompson wrote about the difficulty determining just what point in a tale is important enough to use in its classification; he emphasized that tale types grouped together by subject in the index do not necessarily have any genetic relationship to each other--that is the job for the folklorist to find out through exacting methodology and comparative analysis.⁵⁵

Thompson retained Aarne's classification of the tales into animal tales, ordinary tales, and jokes and anecdotes, but he added sections on formula tales and miscellaneous tales. He omitted literary collections and local legends. The second revision (1961), first proposed in the Lund Conference in 1935, expanded the index to incorporate new collections and surveys. There were a few minor changes in organization as well. In a letter to Christensen (August 18, 1957--Lilly Collection) Thompson listed the criteria he used in checking each archive before making the revision: how many of each type did the archive possess; what types not in the index were in the archives; and what changes in the descriptions of the types would the archives suggest. Bibliographies and motif numbers are included in both editions. Students using the index should read the introduction carefully and check the list of abbreviations used in the work in order to locate types effectively and to understand the nature of the genres and areas dealt with. The Types of the Folktale is an index only for the folktale regions from "India to Ireland;" Thompson believed that other large areas should be indexed separately. Ideally, separate indexes for each genre should be written.

B. The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature

The Motif-Index (two editions) is Thompson's most monumental folklore work, embodying at least forty years of research. It is the publication which Thompson referred to most frequently in his articles. Thompson was impressed by the world-wide similarities in folklore motifs--some of them the result of independent invention from the universal nature of human experience, some of them the result of diffusion. He noted that over one-half of the tale types in Aarne's index consisted of only one motif, and that their existence as independent folklore elements should be documented. The Motif-Index is a practical listing of motifs for the scholar to use in studies of the origin and dissemination of tales. Motifs are grouped by subject, and, as in the type index, Thompson did not intend to imply a relationship among motifs appearing together. It is a scientific classification system like that used by biologists.⁵⁶ Though previous

attempts had been made by several scholars (such as von Hahn, J. Jacobs, Köhler) to construct such lists, they had been too narrow in definition and scope.⁵⁷ Thus the index was not meant to be an end in itself, but only the foundation for future research--particularly historic-geographic study.

"In folklore, the term motif is used to designate any one of the parts into which an item of folklore can be analyzed," said Thompson. It may be an incident, a short, simple story in itself, a background object, an imaginary world, a character. A motif must have something unusual about it that enables it to persist in tradition. Whereas the Finnish folklorists who developed the historic-geographic method believed that each motif was originally part of just one tale, Thompson asserted that motifs are independent elements which may be universal in distribution or widespread in particular tale types over large areas,⁵⁸ but not necessarily attached in origin to a single tale.

In assembling material for the index, Thompson used both literary and oral sources, because of the difficulty in separating the constant flow of elements between the two traditions. Narrative elements of myths, fables, folktales, fabliaux, medieval romances, exempla, jest-books, and local traditions were included, the legends being given the least consideration. No superstitions, customs, proverbs, or riddles were surveyed. The index contains both general and regional bibliographies, twenty-three chapters of motif classifications (each with its own synopsis), cross-references, and a sixth volume which is an index to the index. The student should check the introduction carefully before trying to use either edition.

The revision of the Motif-Index was begun in 1947, and it was published in 1955-58. It represents a more than fifty percent expansion over the first edition, incorporating the more recent collections and studies not previously available. Neither the type index nor motif-index was solely the work of one person. The correspondence files in the Lilly Collection reveal that Thompson received suggestions and motifs from numerous scholars, not the least of whom was Archer Taylor, who had advised Thompson on the indexes from their beginnings. For the second edition Thompson was able to use assistants and secretaries funded by the University. The Motif-Index inspired other writers to make to make regional and genre indexes based upon the same system--for example, Frank Hoffman's index of erotic folklore elements. Thompson purposely

excluded erotic motifs from his index. His reply to a letter from Gershon Legman requesting information on erotic ballads was brief, simply stating that he had no interest in the "pornography" of folklore.⁵⁹

C. The Indexes of Indic Tales

Thompson discounted Theodor Benfey's theory that European folktales came from India, but he recognized that it was an important area in folklore dissemination which deserved separate study. The most important literary collections, he noted, came from India and were especially influential in Europe in the Middle Ages.⁶⁰ Thompson began research on the folktales of India in 1938. His original intention was to write a type index of the tales, but because of the formless nature of the narratives he found it necessary to write a motif index first. This index, entitled The Oral Tales of India, was published with Jonas Balys in 1958, followed by the type index, Types of Indic Folktales (with Warren Roberts) in 1960. Both indexes follow the schemes and numerical organizations of Thompson's previous indexes. No attempt was made to include literary collections, however, and the researchers used only those collections available in the United States.⁶¹ Again, these works were intended to be tools for folklore research.

4. The Study and Description of Folklore

The next two books to be considered contain Thompson's own theoretical and methodological statements as well as evaluations of past and present trends in folklore scholarship. The Folktale, published in 1946, is a good introduction to the theories of the folktale until the time of its publication, and to the broad concerns of the author. Through his discussion of folktale scholarship, Thompson unfolds his plans and hopes for the future of his discipline, the mistakes of the past, and the methods of the present. The majority of Thompson's articles deal with one or more subjects discussed in The Folktale--either as steps in the development of his convictions, or as modifications or elaborations of them.

Although he was aware of new trends in folklore scholarship, Thompson changed few of his ideas after 1946, devoting more of his time to organizational work than to the construction of theories. In a 1965 correspondence with Alan Dundes, Thompson stated some of his doubts about structural and psychoanalytic analyses of folklore, and concluded that he himself was a representative of the past attempting to give the advice of experience to the new generation.⁶²

Thompson wrote to A.H. Gayton on October 26, 1946 concerning the methodology, production, and goals of The Folktale (Lilly Collection). In this letter, he states that he offers to the intelligent reader a book synthesizing the accomplishments of folktale scholarship, and presents a notion of the actual content of a large portion of tales from the European, Asiatic, and North American Indian traditions. In the first part of the book, Thompson discusses storytelling and the various forms of the folktale, including legends, novellas, myths, and hero tales, among others. He summarizes past studies of genres and types and tries to give an idea of historical connections, developments, and the dissemination of folktales. Tradition is the key criterion in Thompson's definition of folklore, whether it be a narrative, song, dance, belief, custom, or item of material culture. "The common idea . . . is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record."⁶³ This process of transmission of folklore items is more crucial than origins in defining them as folklore. Thompson noted that folklore is characterized by the stability of its essential content in tradition and the variations produced by the laws of transmission; as an oral phenomenon it has no standard forms such as are found in literary tradition.⁶⁴

Thompson began his folktale interests as a student of literature, and he constantly emphasized the interrelationships of oral and written narrative versions. Literature and oral literature are actually very different, each following different laws of transmission, but they may seem alike on the surface, since there has been an interchange of content, even style, between them since the very beginnings of written literature.⁶⁵

Three further points about Thompson's ideas should be made here. First, Thompson regarded genre distinctions largely as a matter of convenience for study, in the same manner as the types and motifs of his indexes should be used. One should look at the genre definitions of each culture in regard to its own folklore, especially in primitive cultures where narrative distinctions are vague.⁶⁶ Secondly, the similarities of basic human situations and experiences, and the nature of human thought have produced parallels in folklore types and motifs through independent invention. One must not be too hasty in assuming diffusion between two similar motifs in separate places before the possibility of polygenesis has been adequately considered.⁶⁷ Third, Thompson re-emphasizes in this section the universality of the art of storytelling, particularly among pre-literate

peoples for whom it is an essential means of transmission of information and entertainment. Laws of creation and transmission are the same in all cultures.⁶⁸

The second part of The Folktale is a discussion of the essential tale types of the India-Ireland tradition drawn from the content of the Aarne-Thompson index. Similarly, the third section deals with primitive folktales, and it parallels much of the content of Tales of the North American Indians. These aspects of his work have already been considered above. The last part, on studying the folktale, has been reviewed alternately as the best⁶⁹ and the worst⁷⁰ section of the book, depending upon whether the reviewer associates himself with the theories or methods which Thompson accepts or rejects.

In the first chapter of Part 4, Thompson evaluates the past theories of the folktale. These include:

- a. The broken-down myth theory of folktale origins supported by the Grimms which assumed a common Indo-European mythology;
- b. The theories of the comparative mythologists, led by Max Müller and George Cox, who believed that these Indo-European myths were allegories of celestial phenomena;
- c. The Indianist theory of Theodor Benfey, Reinhold Köhler, and others, which assigned primary importance to India as a source of European and Asiatic folktales;
- d. The evolutionary anthropological theories of the followers of E.B. Tylor and Andrew Lang, who supported the notion of uniform evolutionary stages of culture and independent invention of folklore items;
- e. The ritualist theories which assumed that all narrative genres are derived from primitive ritual.

Thompson concludes that each of these theories may be applicable to certain situations and tales, but that one cannot generalize and attempt to explain all of oral tradition by one formula.⁷¹ In rejecting these encompassing theories, Thompson demonstrates the goal of his scholarship --one cannot speculate on the meaning or ultimate origin of folklore forms until one has examined the available facts concerning the history of each item.⁷²

In a word, the goal of the scholar of folklore is a thorough knowledge of all the circumstances concerning every particular item of folk tradition. This means not only the history of the particular item but also an analysis of it, so as to understand its true nature.⁷³

The chapter on "The International Organization of Folktale Study" is a compilation of information based upon Thompson's researches and personal familiarity with European and American scholarship. He discusses the development of folklore as a discipline in most European countries and in the United States, with emphasis upon the contributions of the Finnish folklorists. This section, combined with some of Thompson's articles and personal correspondence, adds to the picture of the interaction of men and ideas, the changing theories and definitions of the first part of this century, mentioned above in the discussion of his reminiscences.⁷⁴ Thompson stated in a 1932 article that he believed that the chief developments of the first forty years of folklore scholarship were: 1. the annotation of the Grimm collection by Bolte and Polivka, who brought together every significant collection; 2. the development of folklore archives; 3. the compilation of bibliographies and encyclopedias; 4. the establishment of the Folklore Fellows Communications as an instrument of collection, organization, and publication of material of international interests.⁷⁵

Thompson credits the Finns with providing the impetus for comparative folklore studies and scientific methodology, noting the successes of the archives, classification systems, journals (e.g. FFC), and methods, particularly the historic-geographic method developed by Julius and Kaarle Krohn.

A final development of folklore studies which Thompson discusses in this chapter is the international organization of folklorists into associations and congresses, such as the Lund and Edinburgh congresses. Although the information he gives is very general, it is a useful introduction to the organizational forms of the discipline. Thompson's participation in these institutions is discussed further below.

The next chapter, "Collecting Folklore," is, in a sense, a return to the basic steps of scholarship. Thompson emphasized several aspects of collecting. First, he strongly advocated faithful recording of texts and the maintenance of the authenticity of the oral form.⁷⁶ Second, he frequently discussed the location of informants via universities, local societies, and schools. Elderly and middle-aged people usually make the best informants. School children should not be used as informants but may be helpful in locating older people.⁷⁷ Third, Thompson evaluated the techniques, advocating the use of a shorthand or a recording machine to keep the interviewing situation as natural as possible.⁷⁸ A thorough knowledge of local motifs and plots can be used by the

collector to stimulate his informants. Finally, Thompson suggested that American collectors use the experiences of European collectors, particularly the Irish, as guidelines. The Irish Folklore Commission, which utilizes full-time and part-time collectors as well as children, was one of Thompson's favorite examples, especially since he had had the opportunity to observe it firsthand. American collectors need more organization, a broader folklore background, and a central or regional guidebook.⁷⁹

The chapter on "Classifying Folk Narrative" contains an outline of early attempts at listing and cataloging tales prior to Thompson's own indexing work, in which he drew upon these preceding efforts. Again he points out the practical value of listing types and motifs prior to making further analyses and surveys of tales, tale areas, and genres.

"The Life History of a Folktale" deals with the historic-geographic method developed by Finnish scholars. Thompson modified the method (as have most students who have used it); he demonstrated it in his analysis of "The Star-Husband Tale," and he helped propagate its usefulness among scholars by writing frequently about it and encouraging his own students to employ it. His indexes were used as tools by historic-geographic researchers. Thompson credited the development of a more scientific approach to folklore with taking the "study of oral narrative from a purely speculative stage to one where results are based upon ascertained facts."⁸⁰ The method involves the detailed analysis of the history of a complex tale to derive its hypothetical original form. The folktale can reveal the cultural values of its creators, said Thompson; it is more than just a survival from the past. However, in order to derive much meaning from it, one needs to know the probable original form and the history of its dissemination.

Thompson discusses the method thoroughly in this chapter, in his analysis of "The Star-Husband Tale," and in Four Symposia. Since the method is based upon logic, it must be modified to the particular tale and situation one is working with. Ideally, one should have at least seventy-five versions of the tale, for the more versions one uses, the safer are one's conclusions. The tale should be complex so that it can be broken into traits. These are not motifs, but rather the points of variation. Oral versions should be arranged geographically; literary versions chronologically. The tale should be divided into traits, mapped, analyzed by statistical counts, and

evaluated by certain criteria enumerated by Thompson.⁸¹ Gradually one can construct hypothetical sub-types which seem to be local developments of historical and geographical processes.

These sub-types must be ascertained before one constructs the archetype, which is, essentially, the probable original form from which the sub-types could have developed. It is a logical construction with heuristic value, not merely a tabulation of the most frequently found traits.⁸² Since the concept of archetype has been frequently misunderstood, Thompson emphasizes that it is not the actual original form, merely a hypothetical one which can be used to explain the vicissitudes of the tale as it travelled. One cannot know the exact place of origin of the tale, only its earliest known home.⁸³ One assumption of the methodology is that the home area of the tale will retain a form closest to the original.⁸⁴ After the groundwork is done, one can hypothesize about the laws of oral transmission which affected the spread and variation of the tale. Thompson summarizes some of his reasons for using the method:

If the tradition is purely oral, it is continually in flux and the versions one has before him each represent only the form in which a particular teller at a particular place on a particular day told the story. There is of course no question of the reconstruction of the standard text, for the tale changes from day to day. The most that the student can hope for is that on the basis of a very extensive sampling he may be able to discern the elements in this fluid tradition and if he is fortunate, to say something intelligent about the general place of origin and the form of the tradition before it started on its long journey over the world.⁸⁶

Thompson was careful to consider the criticisms directed at the Finnish methodology, reminding his readers that through evaluation of these criticisms one could improve the methods. Albert Wesselski argued for the predominance of the literary over the oral tradition throughout history. Thompson thought that Wesselski was too narrow-minded, but he acknowledged the importance of literary influences and the need to do more research on the problem. C.W. von Sydow argued against the theory of wave-like diffusion of folktales supported by many historic-geographic scholars, pointing out that diffusion is the result of the activities of a few gifted tellers

only and is therefore erratic. He also emphasized the importance of linguistic and geographical boundaries in hampering diffusion; local redactions of tales, he argued, are not sub-types derived from a disseminated archetype, but are separate regional developments from a common distant ancestor (oikotypes). Thompson admitted the need for more studies of transmission, but believed that the completed tale monographs amply demonstrated the diffusion of tales over linguistic and geographical boundaries. His analysis of "The Star-Husband Tale" was an attempt to demonstrate the validity of the method in a situation where there were no written influences and where the above boundaries were negligible (the tradition of the North American Indians)--perhaps the same situation which existed in peasant, pre-literate Europe. This demonstration does not, however, eliminate the validity of the criticisms in studying other tales in other situations.⁸⁷

The last chapter of The Folktale deals with the folktale as living art, and although the aesthetic study of the folktale was not Thompson's specialty, he recognized the importance of the folktale in culture. One can make comparative studies of transmission and of stylistic devices, and one can specify social and psychological aspects of performance within the culture.⁸⁸ Thompson gave at least two points of advice in regard to stylistic and functionalist studies. First, one should maintain the authenticity and integrity of the texts, or one's conclusions will not be valid. Second, one should not be too hasty in generalizing about the meaning of tales without adequate background research and consideration.⁸⁹

Most of Thompson's major tenets have been mentioned. A brief reiteration of his plan for folklore scholarship will help to place them in perspective. He gives the following steps of folktale research leading to the discovery of origins and distributions:

1. Collection
2. Classification
3. Cataloging
4. Elaboration of techniques for study
5. The writing of monographs on individual tales.⁹⁰

Once these steps have been taken, one can proceed to study the folktale as an art, and, finally, discover its meaning.⁹¹ In his letter to Gayton in 1946, Thompson stated that he did not feel that folklore was as serious or as scientific as it should be. He emphasized the need for a knowledge of history, literature, sociology, anthropology--all disciplines related to folklore. Folklore, like the other social

sciences, should be a point of view on society and culture. A folklorist needs a working knowledge of major European languages, along with any others he may be working with, and he must have a practical mastery of the theories and techniques of his discipline.

The last work discussed here, Four Symposia on Folklore, is a transcription of the discussions of the Mid-century Folklore Congress held in Bloomington in 1950. Four broad topics served as guidelines for the symposia: collecting folklore, archiving folklore, making materials available to the public and to scholars, and the study of folklore. Few, if any, of the issues were resolved; they are of continuing interest to students of folklore. Each symposium was divided into four sections, and the remarks of each participant were noted. Of particular interest is the comparison between American and European folklore developments and theories. Most of Thompson's major ideas about folklore study in America were discussed in some aspect in the symposia, and may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Racial, regional, ethnic, and Anglo folklore should be collected and studied, both as part of American folklore and as elements in international traditions.⁹²
2. More systematic collecting, organized on state and local levels, is needed, including training of collectors by universities and local societies.⁹³
3. Increased use of questionnaires and maps, such as those used by various European countries, would be helpful in locating folklore areas if used properly.⁹⁴
4. More folklore museums are badly needed.⁹⁵
5. The Library of Congress Folklore Section should act as a clearinghouse for American folklore. Small archives should be copied on microfilm and the material made available to scholars. The Irish and Swedish systems should serve as models for classification of material.^{96, 97}
6. Folklore should be presented to the public through the media, through folk festivals, and so on, only in its pure, oral form. Folklore items already dead should not be revived, because they no longer have a place in culture. If items are to be revived, they must be brought back into contact with a living tradition.⁹⁸

Stith Thompson wrote numerous book reviews, and though most of them seem to be fair and comprehensive, few contain much overt criticism. His regard for complete, rigorous scholarship is obvious, and when a book is criticized, it is usually on the grounds of insufficient research or lack of comparative notation. Thompson was impressed by scholars with extensive knowledge in their fields and the ability to stimulate, encourage, and organize the efforts of students and associates. He admitted that he used the work of some of these men as models for his own scholarship. In the letter to Gayton (1946) referred to above, Thompson asserted that the techniques of social research have been best exemplified by Franz Boas, Johannes Bolte, Kaarle Krohn, C.W. von Sydow, and their followers.

Thompson and Folklore Organization

1. The United States

The first experience Thompson had with folklore organization was his work as Secretary-Treasurer of the Texas Folklore Society and editor of its first publication (reprinted in 1935 as Round the Levee).⁹⁹ From that time forth he frequently attended many local societies as a member or guest lecturer, and he was active in encouraging their development.¹⁰⁰ In his autobiography he mentions the meetings he attended in connection with his position at Indiana University, particularly as Dean of the Graduate School.

The national organizations in which Thompson was most active were the American Philosophical Society, the Modern Language Association (he was once chairman of the Popular Literature section), and the American Folklore Society. He was elected President of the latter organization in 1936, and he considered it to be an important step in his career. The Society was then at a low ebb; in 1937, at its 50th Anniversary meeting, Franz Boas spoke about its past, and Thompson about its future.¹⁰¹ In his speech, Thompson encouraged the members to broaden the interests of the Society, to explore the varied and rich heritage of the country, to maintain ties with foreign scholars, and to join the efforts of the scholar, the amateur collector, and the folk.¹⁰²

Thompson organized the first Summer Folklore Institute in Bloomington in 1942, with the plan of holding it every four years for eight weeks during the summer. Students, collectors, and professors met together for coursework and informal discussion. The report of the First Institute was published,¹⁰³ and the lecture notes of a student at the Second Institute (1946) have been multigraphed (these are available in the Indiana University Library).¹⁰⁴ These lecture notes include a discussion of the historic-geographic method by Thompson, and a short course on the definition of folklore. The summer institutes gradually faded out as more and more courses in folklore were offered at Indiana during the regular academic year--The Folktale and Allied Forms, Literary Origins, and English and Scottish Popular Ballads were the first graduate courses Thompson taught. A Ph.D. in Folklore was offered after 1950, with students filling in their curricula with courses from related disciplines.

2. International Organizations

According to manuscripts in his personal collection, Thompson took sixteen trips abroad and attended at least sixteen international congresses. He held memberships in the national academies of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and was an honorary member of the folklore societies of thirteen countries. His first election to a foreign learned society (Gustav Adolphus Akademi of Sweden) came in 1935 when he was fifty years old--much of his itinerant folklore career took place in the latter years of his life.

Only three congresses will be discussed here; they represent the first international organizations Thompson attended, and he described their importance in great detail in several articles and manuscripts. He believed that they helped to break the barriers between literary and anthropological scholars. Thompson and Archer Taylor were the only Americans invited to attend the conference of folktale specialists at Lund, Sweden, in 1935. They discussed the collection, classification, and comparative study of folktales, and proposed the formation of an International Institute for Folklore and Anthropology of Northern Europe and the European Populations of America. Its immediate goal was to establish a central European archive and a journal (Folk). An expanded international conference was planned for Edinburgh, Scotland in 1937.¹⁰⁵ Thompson admitted that he felt naive among so many distinguished scholars, yet he was pleased to be recognized for his own work; both he and Seamus O'Duillearga were made members of the Swedish learned society.¹⁰⁶ He was able to get valuable feedback on the reception of his indexes, and he, in turn, encouraged the folklorists to expand their interests beyond Northern Europe.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, at Edinburgh in 1937 the scope of the new organization did broaden, and the new International Association for European Ethnology and Folklore was formed. Plans were discussed for the new archive and for the establishment of the journal, Folk, and Thompson was made a member of the planning committee.¹⁰⁸ He felt that the meeting served to stimulate Scottish interests in their own folklore,¹⁰⁹ just as the Paris Congrès of August, 1937--held in conjunction with the Paris Exposition--did for the French.

Thompson was impressed by the efforts of the Paris folklorists to encompass all of traditional life, and the Congrès was divided into two sections: descriptive folklore, and folklore as applied to social life. They agreed to join with the new International Association for European

Ethnology and Folklore, adopted Folk-Liv as the organ of both congresses, and planned a second meeting in Stockholm in 1940 (subsequently cancelled because of the war). Thompson joined the committees on permanent organization and for assistance on the annual Volkskundliche Bibliographie compiled at Basel.¹¹⁰ In a letter to the U.S. Secretary of State, written on September 26, 1937 (Lilly Collection), Thompson described the activities of the 1937 congresses and expressed his pleasure at the spirit of international cooperation.

On a trip to Europe in 1952, Thompson became interested in another international folklore organization, the International Commission for the Popular Arts and Folklore (CIAP), a division of UNESCO. He served as its Vice-President from 1954-64. However, he admitted discouragement with its limited functions. A letter from R.Th. Christiansen on April 27, 1958 (Lilly Collection) refers to remarks Thompson had made about the cumbersome nature of the organization; evidently its only activity at the time was to publish the annual bibliography. CIAP was reorganized in 1962 at a meeting in Antwerp, and in 1964 it was again reorganized and renamed the Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF).¹¹¹ Thompson played no active role in the new organization.

3. South American Folklore Organization

Thompson's journeys to South America in 1947, 1954, and 1960-61 were mentioned above in the context of his career. His interest in Latin America seems to have been sparked by a visit to Mexico City for New Year's in 1942, when he met Vicente Mendoza and lectured to the Mexican Folklore Society. He taught himself Spanish and began to correspond with Mexican and South American folklorists, some of whom he had met at the Eighth American Scientific Congress in Washington in 1940.¹¹² During his 1947 trip he visited all the countries in South America, lecturing and meeting folklorists and enthusiasts, and collecting books and journals. This new area of interest seems to have been a great stimulation for him; there are numerous letters, programs, and photographs in his personal collections, as well as diaries kept by his wife, to document his interest and enthusiasm in the enterprise. At the invitation of the Venezuelan Ministry of Education, he outlined a successful program for a Folklore Service.

Although Thompson was impressed with the work of certain individuals, local societies, and museums in South America, he found the folklore work in many countries poorly organized and hampered by political and ethnic difficulties. The use of folklore as

propaganda in South America and Europe during World War II disturbed him, and he wrote about it with some dismay in his autobiography. Through his lectures, articles, correspondences, and Summer Institutes, however, Thompson helped to spread a network of communications among folklorists in Europe and the Americas.¹¹³

Thompson and the Critics

Most evaluations of Stith Thompson have been made in connection with his books; it is therefore appropriate to mention some of the appraisals made of his folklore books and to attempt to summarize briefly the types of criticisms given. Some evaluative remarks are to be found in the Lilly Collection correspondences. However, with the exception of those persons Thompson was on close personal terms with, most remarks are either very general and non-critical, or are suggestions concerning relevant materials. Indeed, there remains a scarcity of fair critical evaluations of his works and activities. Most of the available reviews are of the Tales of the North American Indians, The Types of the Folktale, The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, and The Folktale.

1. Tales of the North American Indians

This book was well-received upon its publication, because it filled a need for a survey of North American Indian folklore, which had not yet been attempted; it brought together the collections made by anthropologists, primarily Franz Boas and his students. Boas stated that it is an indispensable aid to distribution studies.¹¹⁴ Its comparative notes and bibliography have been pointed out as being particularly useful to scholars.¹¹⁵ However, since the book presents only a limited number of well-told versions of tales, and in English translation, reviewers have noted its inadequacy for stylistic studies.¹¹⁶ Thompson never intended it to serve such a purpose; but he did withdraw the manuscript from the University of Chicago Press when they asked him to rewrite the tales in his own style.

2. The Types of the Folktale

John Spargo, in reviewing the first edition of the index, praised Thompson's analytic powers, his "philosophical sense" of the folktale, and his useful expansion of Aarne's index into a more understandable practical guide. Spargo mentions a few omissions in the index, and suggests the need for a clear definition of "type" from Thompson.¹¹⁷ Warren Roberts, too, emphasizes its value as a basic research tool and as a model for future indexes.¹¹⁸ One of the most negative evaluations was delivered by Bengt Holbek in articles written in 1962 and 1965.¹¹⁹ Holbek criticizes the theories behind the index and the historic-geographic method. There is no "ur-form" or "normal form," he says;

tales do not conform to their descriptions in the index. The indexes do not help students who are interested in the reasons why tales deviate from patterns. Holbek expresses great disappointment with the second revision of the book, asserting that Thompson has deviated from Aarne's original interests, shown no clear principles of selection, and ignored differences between oral and written tradition. Holbek believes that such illogical indexes as this one are only a hinderance to research, and he suggests a new classification of folklore materials based upon thematically coherent groups of tales--a concept which he defines as vaguely as he accuses Thompson of defining his.

3. The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature

Among the first evaluations of the index was that made of the original 400-page draft by Kaarle Krohn, and conveyed to Thompson by Archer Taylor in a letter in 1925 (Lilly Collection). Krohn believed that Thompson did not always distinguish clearly among motif, trait, episode, theme, tale, and cycle. He urged Thompson to concentrate on the materials possessed in common by the North American Indians and Europeans, suggested other works which should be surveyed, and advised certain stylistic changes. In a second letter (April 8, 1925) Taylor conceded that he did not think that Krohn had really grasped the idea.

When the first volume of the first edition of the index appeared in 1932, its reception was favorable, and, like the type index, it was held to be an invaluable research aid and a model for future studies. Kurt Ranke called it a "Grand piece of humanistic research," essential for historical and comparative folklore studies.¹²⁰ C.H. Gerould acclaimed it as an indispensable guide, a framework for future studies, and an asset in the intelligent study of folklore inter-relationships.¹²¹

Both the first and second editions were also subject to some negative criticisms, principally concerning errors of omission in the text or bibliography. A.H. Gayton felt it did not meet the needs of studying the North American Indians;¹²² other critics similarly noted culture areas not fully represented. S.E. Hyman, in a sensational review of the Motif-Index and The Folktale, called the index "Unrepresentative," "Undiscriminating," and "unscientific."¹²³ Ranke pointed out that some of the sources were unpublished or inaccessible, though that could hardly be called a criticism of the index itself. He also stated that the selection criteria for bibliographic references were too vague, and the bibliography too brief.¹²⁴

Many criticisms have been based upon misunderstandings of the purpose of the index. In a letter to Thompson dated November 19, 1953 (Lilly Collection), Martha Beckwith criticized him for listing motifs with no real connections, and for giving no idea of the number of times a motif occurs. Presumably, Beckwith was referring to the number of times a motif occurred in Thompson's sources. As for connections, Thompson states in his introduction to the indexes that no genetic relationship between motifs listed together can be assumed without research to support the hypothesis.

4. The Folktale

When it was published in 1946 this book was also well-received, though it was subject to more criticism than the indexes, mainly in reaction to Thompson's own criticisms of folklore theories. Roberts, one of Thompson's own students, hailed it as the best survey of folktale scholarship yet published (as of 1946) in English; it was a unique and comprehensive approach to the field.¹²⁵ Sven Liljeblad, whom Thompson had supported in coming to the U.S., and with whom he was a personal friend, wrote especially praisefully of Thompson's work:

In his latest book, he relates with clarity and elegance the kaleidoscope history of what has now become a duly constituted science, and the indisputable facts it has established.

Thompson has learned from masters in his field, said Liljeblad; his knowledge of the folktale is unsurpassed, and his sound judgement is a model for research.¹²⁷

Though praise of the book was generalized, the criticism, as usual, was more specific. S.E. Hyman, in a review entitled, "Some Bankrupt Treasuries,"¹²⁸ made scathing statements about Thompson's style, his point of view, his interpretations. Thompson rejects material for unsatisfactory reasons, Hyman asserted; he "studies so much and knows so little." Playing upon Thompson's intentions to write for the general reader, Hyman contended that the book was badly written. "The book shares all the sterility, pointlessness, and Nordic-centered chauvinism of the Finnish school (with its bland assumption that any interesting or complex tale must be of European, probably Northern, origin)."¹²⁹ The latter statement, probably a reference to Thompson's discussion of the historic-geographic method, cannot be taken too seriously,

insofar as Hyman was attacking the scholars who discredited his own ritualist theories and their methods as much as he was criticizing Thompson's work.

Alexander Krappe, like Hyman, sharply criticized Thompson's style, which he felt underestimated the intelligence of his readers. In his review, Krappe pointed out mistakes in associations, origins, and distributions of tales, accused Thompson of delivering a "sales talk" for the historic-geographic method, and asserted that Thompson overlooked important issues of folklore study (i.e., structure, function, meaning of tales).¹³⁰ One must remember, however, that Thompson did not believe that folklore scholarship was ready to explore these issues, and felt it was not his purpose to discuss them.

In summary, the following kinds of evaluations have been made of Thompson's book by his contemporaries:

1. His comprehensive, thorough research was considered to be a model for serious folktale scholarship.
2. He produced valuable tools for the more scientific folklore studies.
3. His books are guides for further folktale study, especially in the classification of folktales.
4. Thompson's style was criticized as being unscholarly in some of his writings.
5. He rejected all points of view but his own.
6. He was not a collector and was far removed from his sources.
7. He ignored function, performance, meaning, stylistics, and structure of folktales in favor of origin and diffusion.
8. There were mistakes and omissions in his books, particularly in the indexes.
9. His classification system was arbitrary and vague. This is one of the strongest, most valid, and most frequently cited criticisms. Indexing is, as Thompson admitted, a subjective process.
10. The indexes have been shown to have limited value to students who are not employing the historic-geographic method.
11. The performance-minded folklorists believe that Thompson's emphasis on tradition in the definition of folklore was too limited; he ignored folklore as a "performance event."¹³¹
12. Because of his support of the historic-geographic method, Thompson received numerous criticisms which were actually directed at the methodology: its lack of significant conclusions, its requirements for comprehensive data collection (Ideally, all versions of a tale should be collected), its mechanical nature,

its limited usefulness in genres other than the complex tale and ballad, its excessive labors and often self-evident results. Thompson's study of "The Star-Husband Tale" has been criticized for these reasons. Frank Young has accused Thompson of looking at the tale atomistically, for describing but not explaining oral transmission and change.¹³²

Evaluation of Stith Thompson and his Work

One cannot fairly criticize the scholar of the past on the basis of new knowledge gained or new methods developed. Similarly, one cannot attack him for not doing what he never intended to do. Thompson himself, in all his writings, was cautious in his evaluations and interpretations of folklore and folklore researches. He repeatedly warned against reaching conclusions too soon without examining all available data. So, too, one cannot be too hasty in criticizing any but the most overt mistakes and omissions. Thompson set his own standards of scholarship based on the accomplishments of European masters and worked accordingly. One can find in his articles and books frequent recognitions that other types of folklore studies--e.g., functionalist studies--can and will be made, but he did not attempt to deal with them. Admittedly, Thompson had strong reservations about some theories of folklore interpretation; but it was his hope that eventually, after years of collecting, classifying, and analyzing particular tales, folklore scholarship would be able to understand the art and function of stories and storytelling--perhaps even their meaning. In his 1964 letter to Gayton, Thompson expressed the hope that folklore would never crystallize into divergent schools, but in his later writings he acknowledged that folklorists are developing separate points of view, and that he could only recommend the best examples of past scholarship as guidelines.

Stith Thompson contributed to the study of folklore in at least three important aspects. First, he set high standards of research and analysis for himself, and encouraged many others to follow. Second, he set precedents for future comparative folklore studies, especially classification studies. He followed Krohn's example in the United States by helping to bring folklore study from a speculative interest to a scientific discipline based on collection, classification, and publication of empirical data--the foundation of research in any discipline. Third, Thompson's enthusiastic organization of students and scholars of folklore in the United States and abroad brought a greater unity to their interests, enhanced cooperative efforts, and helped smooth the way for world-wide comparative folklore research. In short, one must acknowledge the scope and practical value of his work in assembling folklore material; and if folklore scholarship has subsequently taken new directions, that is no criticism of Thompson and his work in his own time

and according to his own purposes, in which he seems to have succeeded remarkably well.

There are several more specific points to consider in accordance with the evaluations of Thompson's work given above:

1. Thompson's style is usually smooth, effortless, lucid, sometimes modest, sometimes extravagant--perhaps the result of his work in English composition. It does tend at times to be simplistic and superficial, primarily in lectures and articles intended for a non-academic audience.

2. Thompson did not deal sufficiently in any of the works surveyed with the issue of survivals and revivals. His ideas on which folklore items have survived, and which should or should not be revived, are unclear.

3. Thompson's belief that storytelling is essentially a dead art in Western society is debatable. Some forms of traditional folktales (as he defined them) may now be lost, but storytelling itself is a process independent of any particular genre or narrative form.

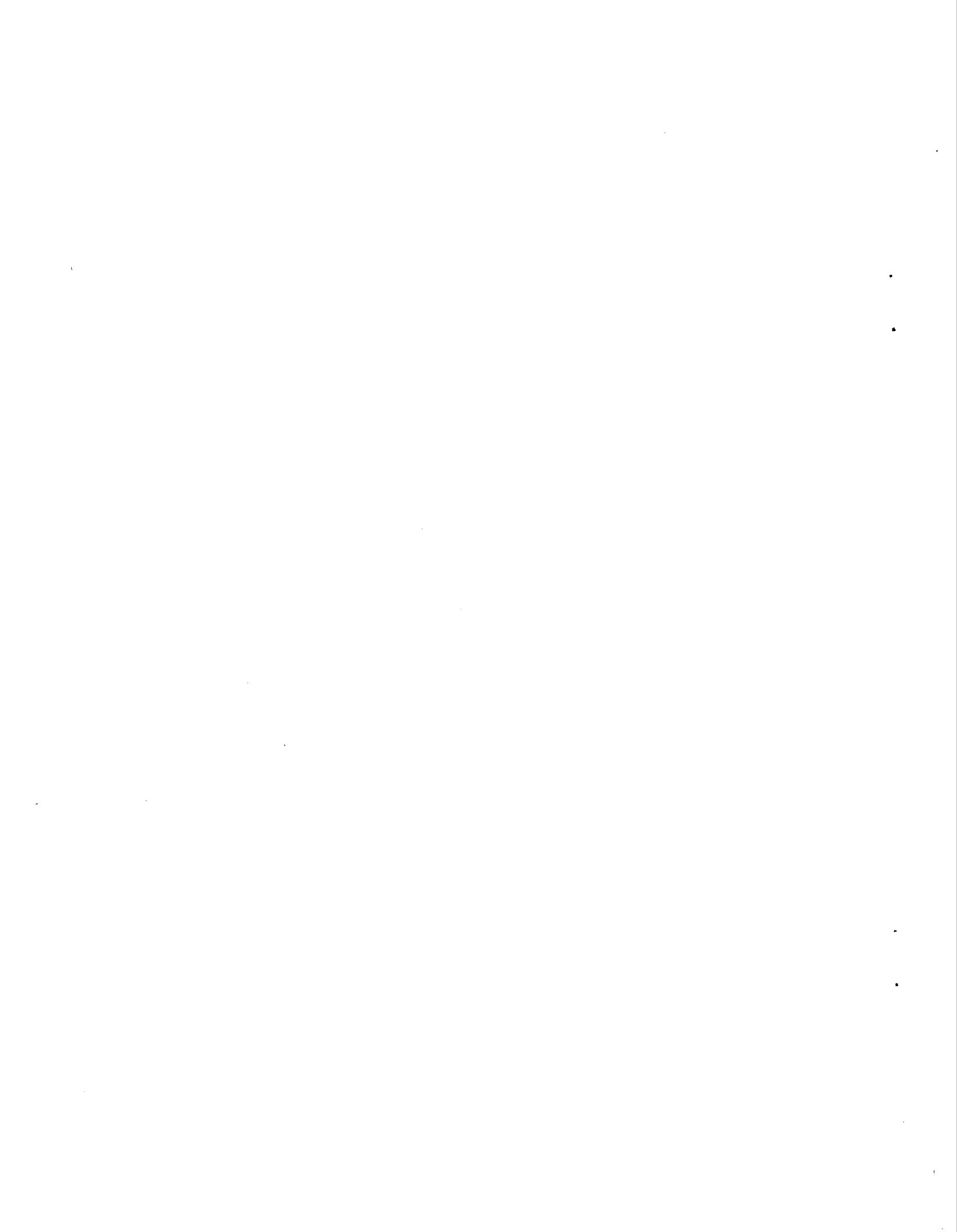
4. Thompson was at times cautious to the point of being inconclusive, primarily in his articles meant for the general reader. One often has doubts as to the nature of the ideas behind his statements. Admittedly, he was more a proponent of methodology (with an implicit theory) than of theory itself.

5. Thompson often did ignore the individual teller in tradition, failing to ground his statements in the reality of particular situations and contexts. However, he qualified himself as a scholar, not as a fieldworker or performer.

6. Thompson was interested in almost anything new he encountered, but his refusal to take the interpretation of myth and folktale beyond the most obvious meaning only would seem to be an avoidance of crucial aspects of folklore and folklore investigation which need not await the completion of diffusionist studies.

7. In spite of the general inconclusiveness of the historic-geographic method, the rigorous study it inspired in the first half of this century must be admired. Nevertheless, the value of the method as a prerequisite for other kinds of folklore studies has been overestimated. Since these studies are seldom done anymore, Thompson's indexes no longer serve as a tool for that methodology, but they do serve as references for the identification and location of folklore items. Similarly, The Folktale is outdated in its approach and theoretical bias, but the information and bibliography contained in it are still valuable in a review of the past and--to a lesser extent--present scholarship.

NOTES



Notes

The following journal abbreviations are used in the notes:

JAF Journal of American Folklore

PMLA Publications of the Modern Language Association
of America

SFQ Southern Folklore Quarterly

1. Stith Thompson, Folklorist's Progress (Bloomington: Privately Multigraphed, 1956), pp. 3-13.
2. Ibid., p. 20.
3. Ibid., p. 23.
4. Ibid., p. 26.
5. Ibid., p. 29.
6. Ibid., pp. 34-35.
7. Hari Upadhyaya, "Reminiscences of an Octogenarian Folklorist," Asian Folklore Studies 27 (1968), 227.
8. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 39.
9. Autobiographical Manuscript, Lilly Collection.
10. Stith Thompson, "Paul Bunyan in 1910," JAF 59 (1946), 134-35.
11. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 48.
12. See "A Humanist's Creed," Bloomington: Unitarian Universalist Church, Sermon Series.
13. Upadhyaya, "Reminiscences," p. 109.
14. In a letter to Clyde Hyder, October 8, 1955 (Lilly Collection), Thompson expressed dismay that Kittredge had not been aware of Aarne's work and had not informed him of it.
15. Stith Thompson, "Recollections of an Itinerant Folklorist," in Mesquite and Willow, eds. M.C. Boatright, W.M. Hudson, and A. Maxwell (Dallas:

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16. Stith Thompson, Manual and Notebook for English Composition (with J.F. Royster) (Chicago: Scott-Foresman, 1916); Practice Sheets for English Composition (with J.F. Royster) (Chicago: Scott-Foresman, 1918); Old English Poems (with Cosette Faust) (Chicago: Scott-Foresman, 1918); Guide to Composition (with J.F. Royster) (Chicago: Scott-Foresman, 1918).
17. Laurens J. Mills, "Stith Thompson: Authority on the Habits of the Kwakiutl and the Tsimshians," The Rainbow of Delta Tau Delta 60 (1937), 227.
18. Thompson, "Recollections," pp. 122-23.
19. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 79.
20. Ibid., p. 81.
21. Statement found in a MS in the Lilly Collection.
22. Robert E. Harris, "Archdeacon of Comma Hounds: My Friend Stith Thompson," The Vagabond 3:3-4 (1926), 70.
23. Undated letter from Archer Taylor in 1925, and a letter from Taylor dated April 8, 1925 (Lilly Collection).
24. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 105.
25. Ibid., pp. 112-18.
26. Principally historic-geographic methodology and indexing techniques.
27. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 120.
28. Ibid., p. 29.
29. Letter to Archer Taylor dated April 11, 1939 (Lilly Collection).
30. Stith Thompson, The Folktale (New York: Dryden Press, 1946). Lecture notes for this seminar were published as "Informal Notes on Transactions and Lectures of Second Folklore Institute of America" (Bloomington: Indiana University, Privately Multigraphed, 1946).

31. Stith Thompson, "Folklore in South America," JAF 61 (1948), 256-60; "Visits to South American Folklorists," JAF 74 (1961), 391-97.
32. The Lilly Collection contains a folder of correspondences and documents concerning the establishment of the Indiana University Press.
33. Warren Roberts was the first student to obtain a Ph.D. in Folklore. He later taught Thompson's course on "The Folktale and Allied Forms" when Thompson retired.
34. Stith Thompson, Four Symposia on Folklore, Indiana University Publications Folklore Series, no. 8 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953).
35. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, p. 278.
36. Upadhyaya, "Reminiscences," 125-26.
37. Thompson also had Honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Colorado College, Indiana Central College, and the University of Kentucky. Information contained in MS in Lilly Collection.
38. John T. Flanagan, "Review of One Hundred Favorite Folktales," Comparative Literature Studies 6 (1969), 342-43.
39. Manuscript, Lilly Collection.
40. Stith Thompson, "The Idea of the Soul in Teutonic Popular Tales and Popular Ballads" (Master of Arts Thesis, University of California, 1912), p. 44.
41. Stith Thompson, European Tales Among the North American Indians: A Study in the Migration of Folktales (Colorado Springs: Colorado College Publications, no. 54, 1919); "Sunday School Stories Among Savages," Texas Review 3 (January, 1918), 109-16.
42. Stith Thompson, "The Transmission of Folktales," in The Charles Mills Gayley Anniversary Papers (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1922), p. 136.
43. Warren E. Roberts, "Stith Thompson: His Major Works and a Bibliography," ARV: Tidskrift for Nordisk Folkminnesforskning 21 (1965), 5.

44. Ibid., p. 7.
45. Archer Taylor, "Review of Tales of the North American Indians," American Literature 1 (1930), 453-54.
46. Erna Gunther, "American Indian Literature," Folk-Say (1930), 408-10; Franz Boas, "Review of Tales of the North American Indians," JAF 43, 223-24.
47. Stith Thompson, "The Challenge of Folklore," PMLA 79, 359.
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54. Stith Thompson, "Type," in Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, vol. 2, ed. Maria Leach (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), pp. 1137-38.
55. Stith Thompson, "Advances in Folklore Studies," in Anthropology Today: An Encyclopaedic Inventory, ed. A.L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 594.
56. Stith Thompson, "Informal Notes," p. 9; Stith Thompson, "Purpose and Importance of an Index of Types and Motifs," Folk-Liv 1 (1938), 107-8.
57. Thompson, "Purpose and Importance," p. 103.
58. Stith Thompson, "Motif," in Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, vol. 2, p. 753.

59. Letter dated April 12, 1955.
60. Stith Thompson, "Problems in Folklore," in An Introduction to Research in English Literary History, ed. Chauncey Sanders (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 259-60.
61. Upadhyaya, "Reminiscences," pp. 125-26.
62. Letter dated October 12, 1965.
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64. Stith Thompson, "American Folk Tradition," The Review 62:6 (1964), 7-8.
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67. Stith Thompson, "Narrative Motif Analysis as a Folklore Method," Folklore Fellows Communications (FFC) 161 (1955), 4.
68. Thompson, "The Challenge of Folklore," pp. 357-58.
69. Sven Liljeblad, "Review of The Folktale," SFQ 11 (1947), 158.
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71. Thompson, The Folktale, p. 388.
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73. Stith Thompson, "Folklore and Folk Festivals," Midwest Folklore 4 (1954), 10.
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110. Ibid., p. 198; Thompson, "Folklore News," 95-96.
111. Upadhyaya, "Reminiscences," 129.
112. Thompson, Folklorist's Progress, pp. 165-66, 182.

113. Thompson, "Folklore in South America," 256-60; Thompson "Visits to South American Folklorists," 391-97.
114. Boas, "Review of Tales of the North American Indians," 223-24.
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118. Roberts, "Stith Thompson," 9.
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ERRATA

- Page 10, paragraph 2: "universityies" should read "universities"
- Page 13, paragraph 2: "demans" should read "demands"
- Page 22, paragraph 3: "offolktales" should read "of folktales"

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