
FOLKLORE

A N D

HISTORY

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THIS ARTICLE is an edited version of the Friday evening keynote address presented at the 137th annual meeting and history conference of the Minnesota Historical Society, "Land of 10,000 Folkways," held October 10-11, 1986, in Bloomington, Minnesota. Henry Glassie's pioneering work in the study of material culture, folk art, vernacular architecture, and folk history has earned him an international reputation as one of this country's leading folklore scholars. Professor of folklore and folklife, American civilization, and architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, Glassie is the author of several books, including Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1969), Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (1975), and Passing the Time in Ballymenone (1982), winner of the John L. Haney Prize in the Social Sciences. Glassie also serves on seven editorial boards and on as many advisory boards ranging from the Smithsonian Institution to the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, Virginia, and he has lectured throughout the United States and abroad. His current research interests focus on the traditional arts and folk artists of Turkey, where he has conducted extensive fieldwork over the past three years.

FOLKLORE and history make a pair, a contrastive pair. In the common language, folklore and history align in opposition to provide one of the antinomies we use to bring a little order into the mess.

History is true. Folklore, an elder historian once told me with a smile, is "a pack of damned lies." Folklore is a polite synonym for malarkey as in the phrase, "that's just a lot of folklore." Folklore is made of lies but not important ones. History is important; momentous events are "historic," while folklore is marginal, fetching but trivial. History is also gone. "One more out,"

the announcer intones in the bottom of the ninth, "and this game is history." By contrast, folklore is false, insignificant, and oddly vital.

Folk history is an oxymoron: a false truth. Legend, the genre through which folk history claims life, was once defined as a falsehood believed to be true.¹ When a child, I was told how Colonel John S. Mosby, cornered by the Yankees in northern Virginia, loaded a cannon with a beehive that fell amid the bluecoats and scattered them, delivering the rebel hero. From such legends in which the impossible is presented as so, the idea of false truth expands subtly to contaminate tales that are not untrue. The story raised upon memory is a legend too: the time Ernie met a ghost in his kitchen, the time Alice saw a ghost that turned out to be a rambling calf, the time the priest gave Peter a new pair of shoes, the time Mehmet bought his first tractor. The little legend of common life is guilty by association. It is not a lie, but it is like a lie, for it does not fit; it cannot be accommodated within historical knowledge.

Maybe false, maybe only irrelevant, folk history is absurd because it holds no meaningful relation to the historian's chronicle of fact. The absurdity of folk history, its nature as lie or lie-like, is maintained by the careful preservation of legends in fragmentary condition. All fragments are in themselves absurd. They become meaningful as contexts are developed around them. The junk the archaeologist lifts so carefully out of the earth would remain junk if the archaeologist failed to embed it anew in the context of history. The lone texts of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or

¹ The definition of the legend in Stith Thompson's monumental *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1946), 8-9, reduces to a believed falsehood. When Robert Georges takes up the task of rethinking the legend in his paper in Wayland D. Hand's *American Folk Legend: A Symposium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 1-19, he properly derives a definition of the legend that would serve as well to define history.

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Robert E. Lee's General Order Number Nine would be absurd had there been no Civil War. The war invests them with a context within which they trade peculiarity for significance.

Wrenched from the locations in which they fit and make sense, pinned to the page, fragments of folk history become vulnerable, things to mock, pity, or exploit. They seem funny (emblems of happy ignorance) or pathetic (signs of poverty) or they prove useful. The useful folk history text is one that can be squeezed into one of the minor pits that pock the coherent whole of history, providing a dash of color or a populist detail without disrupting the big picture.²

Dismissed as lies or humbled with servitude, folk historical texts cry for contexts of their own. Rarely have scholars answered. But let us consider one folk history as a coherent whole.

In Ballymenone, a hilly small place by a vast lake in Northern Ireland, history appears in dark gatherings by low fires at night. It arrives as small stories, as fragments intimately a part of the onflow of conversation. Yet, in Ballymenone hundreds of discrete tales represent a limited set of categories that interlock into a unity.³

First come tales of the saints, of Patrick and Columcille, of Febor, Mogue, and Naile, who bring the Good News and quicken the soul. In their stories, the saints arrive at the dawn of history to demonstrate their power and leave cures in the earth that prove God's existence. They place upon people the obligation to

² The problems involved in making oral historical texts useful to the historian are described clearly in Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981).

³ I set forward Ballymenone's folk history in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), especially p. 35-311, 499-523, 621-665. Key texts reappear in the small book I compiled out of gratitude for the people of Ballymenone: *Irish Folk History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 21-32, 52-65, 88-92, 117-121, and comparable tales from all of Ireland appear in the chapters on Faith, Wit, and History in my *Irish Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

"love your neighbor as yourself, and in that you shall live." Now history twists into war.

In the second class of tale, battles rage. Bloody events from the 16th to the 20th centuries return in artful narrative by the fireside, but the fight at Mackan Hill on July 13, 1829, presents most clearly and fearfully the structure of war. Men threatened with the destruction of their homes rally and overcome the odds against them in a great victory that turns out to be a great defeat. Neighbors who should be loved are killed, pitchforked on the grass. Their names are repeated in melancholy litany.

Between saints and warriors, commanded to love, compelled to break the commandment (for this is war-rattled Ulster), common people work to shape their wee lives. The third class of historical tale tells how local people by dint of bravery or wit build life amid pain. The widow Timoney walks 40 miles in a day to pay her rent to the avaricious landlord. George Armstrong overcomes cholera and failed hopes in a foreign land by beating his travail into comic hyperbole.

Ballymenone's history is an arrangement of fact that calls people to consider their condition and challenges them to continue. It is not common property; Ballymenone's history is the possession and creation of a few wise old men called "historians." Such a one was Hugh Nolan who apprenticed himself to the great historians of his youth, Master Corrigan and Hugh McGiveney. Mr. Nolan told me that his obligation was to gather up the old history, hold to the truth, and tell the whole tale. His obligation was his delight, for true words, he said, flowed effortlessly over his tongue and released sensations of comfort through his body.

In speaking history, Mr. Nolan simultaneously met responsibilities to truth and to his neighbors. In this, Hugh Nolan was like any serious historian. His history, exactly like that worked up in our academies, is a coherent, truthful compilation of facts about the past designed to be useful in the present.

The past is not history. History is a story about the past. It is not something apart from the actions of historians who are distracted by the racket of their predicament and attracted to truth and service. History exists because historians will it to be. In the will of the folk

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historian and the academic historian resides the same virtue. At root, there is no difference between folk and academic histories.

Viewed from within, from the perspective of the historian at work in a community, all histories are history. Viewed from without, all histories are folk histories, in some measure false and irrelevant. Simply, folk history is what we call other people's history, and if they were snide enough to adopt our terms, folk history is what they would name the history confected in the little community of the academy.

History is the attempt of an individual to remain truthful to the past and useful to society. To be sure, all historical traditions contain charlatans, people who pretend to responsibility to advance the cause of the self. There are people in the country who reduce history to storytelling, who spin yarns that startle and amuse, and there are people who, wishing to gain the affection of the outsider, will concoct fictions in response to persistent questions. In the academy, there are people who reduce history to little exercises in order to get tenure, and there are people who lie about the past to prop the regimes of corrupt princes. But these are not historians. Historians are those who succeed in maintaining their double responsibility to the past and the future.

Making the past useful to the future, historians provide the directly utilitarian: stories of past market behavior to aid the investor, stories of past weather to aid the farmer. And historians provide the profoundly useful. Meditating upon the Civil War, Robert Penn Warren captured history's grand purpose. It is to array before us the potentials and limitations of "our common humanity."⁴ To that end precisely, Hugh Nolan reminded his neighbors of the saints, soldiers, and workaday heroes of their home place.

Folk history and academic history cannot be sundered by truth, for both are as true as their practitioners can make them. Nor can they be sundered by significance, for both are meaningful in context, absurd when shattered into fragments. Differences do remain.

A minor difference between folk and academic histories is to be found in the medium of communication. In oral history it is difficult to preserve the unmemora-

ble; the welter of dull detail and fine webs of qualification that make written arguments seem complex and convincing do not belong in good tales. Oral history cannot be boring. Yet, in oral history it is harder to lie. Face to face with a small and knowledgeable audience, the historian is checked constantly and prevented from drifting off along lines of thought that shifting, shifting permute into falsehood in the solitude of the study.

The major differences between folk and academic history abide in the culture of the historian. From deep in their cultures historians extract an idea of the real, which forms the basis for their descriptions of action. In Ballymenone, a history lacking God would be absurd. It is not unreasonable for God to murder a landlord in a tale, just as it was not dementia that led Stonewall Jackson to credit God with his victories. In the American academy, a historian, even a religious one, would not make God's will an explanation within a scholarly treatise. Differences of narrative order further separate Ballymenone and the American academy. In Ballymenone, history is arranged spatially. Events are less part of a temporal chain than they are rooted eternally in specific places. In the academy, time dominates. Events are subsumed to causative sequence. And finally, the human condition is apprehended differently. In Ballymenone, happiness is not the main thing, freedom is improbable, life is a matter of brave adjustment, and Ballymenone's historians stress dilemma, states of powerlessness, modes of endurance. The comfortable, liberated academic historian holds to the dream of freedom and fixates upon the willful manipulation of power.

History is culture. Different cultures shape different histories. Without resort to falsification, historians select different facts and arrange them differently because historians live in different societies governed by different needs.

Recognizing that all histories are blendings of the memorable and the useful, how do we as historians in one community face the histories constructed in other

⁴ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1961), 100-101.

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communities? Let us call histories of the other “folk history.” What do we do with folk histories?

We can steal from them, using the purloined fragments to provide a tone of democratic comprehensiveness to texts that are neither democratic nor comprehensive. Or we can labor to learn the fullness of alien historical constructs. These whole accounts, their texts breathing in their own contexts, will help us challenge and clarify our culture of history.

If folk history takes the universe as unknowable and accepts God as an actor, we understand why folk history welcomes mystery and seems unconcerned about the mechanics of causation. We judge folk history to be bad history because of its sacred base, its crediting of supernatural agency. Then contemplating our rejection of mystery, we not only face the atheism of historical science, we are shocked by the incompleteness of our faith. Academic history brims with godlike agents. Invisible age spirits flit about, worming into people like medieval demons to cause the strange consistency of historical periods. Vast superorganic powers force people to do things they do not wish to do. Culture makes men fools, economy makes them move. Have you ever seen an economy? No, you have seen things—acts of buying and selling, of manufacture and the accumulation of commodities—that you take as evidence for the existence of an economy. The person of faith has not seen God but has found the world full of things that witness to God’s reality. The structure of belief is the same, and noting in the academy the survival of a weird host of invisible forces, we should be urged toward a more honest faith or toward a more rigorous realism, a more thoroughgoing existentialism, as part of our vow to atheistic procedure.

If folk history is organized spatially, we understand why it is unsteady about dates and loose in its handling of causative sequences. Folk history is bad history because of its chronological confusion. But contemplating the virtues of folk history, we find our sins of space rising once more. We remember again that our “world history” is a provincial history and it is not made global by random references to the Orient. We sacrifice world history to our desire to tell the tale of time through the arrangement of periods progressively toward ourselves.

While we do so, we not only ignore whole continents, we miss—even within our regional tale—that which does not change and so fails to contribute to the sweep of narration. A spatially ordered history could expand, region by region, to cover the globe, and it could accommodate slow change and nonchange, enduring and universal realities. But prisoned in our culture of progress, we ignore geography, banish the perduring into irrelevance, and construct a chronology that so streamlines the human story that it becomes an admirable artwork of relevance to almost no one.

If folk history is concerned with the powerless, we understand why its key figures are not great men so much as they are types, important more for their embodiment of eternal virtues than for their performance of notable deeds. They endure, yet in enduring they exhibit immense power and creativity. They make homes, win life from the sullen earth, and sweep the heavens with their poetry. But these are not the powers historians mean by power, so the little heroes of folk history are left powerless and folk history is judged to be bad because its actors are insignificant. Thinking upon that characterization, we learn that by “power” we do not mean the capacity to act (by which definition the peasant who builds homes and makes music would be more powerful than the prince), but the ability to make others act. We recognize that historians by stressing one kind of power serve those who wield that kind of power and they have thereby failed to meet the needs of all the people, leaving to a thousand folk histories the task of describing people scaled to our proportions. Academic historians have frenetically searched through alternative histories for exceptional individuals—black leaders, women who act like men—when they should have stopped to study folk histories, from them learning ways to arrange a history that can account for the whole of the human condition.

We study histories of the other to clarify our own history, to raise its presuppositions and shortcomings into view, so that, meeting the needs of the age, we can work toward a global history free of the biases—the atheistic, progressive, power-obsessed biases—that prevent us now from approaching directly most of the world’s people.

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By first treating every culture as the context for its own history, we will realize that our culture's history, even if patched with a hundred embarrassing revisions, will not do. We cannot add to the smooth white column that represents the achievement of a few western men a lump to symbolize rich women, a rag for the poor, a bangle for Islam . . . and hope by accretion to assemble a monument that all the world's citizens can take as their own.

We must begin anew. Proud of the accomplishment of academic history, yet chastened by folk history, we know our history will need to include the sacred as well as the secular, the spatial as well as the temporal, the constant as well as the revolutionary, the powerless as well as the powerful. To serve our vast neighborhood, we will have to construct a history for every society. Our problem is only the location of a resource out of which to create. Written documents, the customary resource of the academic historian, will not do, for most people have not written. And oral tradition, the resource of the folk historian, provides a poor guide to the far past and, like the written tradition, it tells of the exceptional more than the commonplace. We need a resource distributed widely in space and deeply in time that will allow us to divide the earth's surface into coherent segments and then enable us to search backward within them to discover their own patterns of development. The answer is the artifact, the object into

which people pack their minds for permanence: the house, the park and fen, the sloping hedged field, the mask and basket, broken crockery, cardboard boxes of family photos, bowls of copper, spoons of horn, blades of steel, temples of stone, bone flutes, reed mats, sleek missiles aimed at the sky, clocks, dolls, calf-bound books, cities sprawling on the plain, trails across the moorland. The world is a ripe topic for the world's historians.⁵

Accepting the challenge of folk history and the opportunity of the artifact, we have a chance to co-operate in the construction of a history that will entail the truth in all histories, that will embrace multitudes.

Or, say it like this. We know what is important: sun slanting through the leaves, a baby's smile, an easy dinner with family and friends, satisfying rest, work that engages the mind and the hand and the heart. We need a history that can speak and teach of the important things in life.

⁵ The best work I have done in wresting history out of the artifact is in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, 315-495, but my most complete statement is *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975). For clearer argument I refer you to James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977), and for a great model to W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955).





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