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Folklore Studies, Fieldwork and the Making of a Domestic Anthropology in *Fin-de-Siècle* Britain

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Abstract

This article follows the ‘communities of knowledge-making’ that formed around folklore collection at the end of the nineteenth century. Often regarded as eccentric or marginal figures in the history of human science, these collectors in fact engaged in lively and sophisticated discussions about the methodologies needed to study the mental lives of fellow human beings. The article tracks how these collectors came to emphasize the virtues of immersive, first-hand ethnographic fieldwork, in a way that built on a longstanding tradition of antiquarian studies at the local level. In doing so, they cut against the grain of prevailing social-evolutionist theories that insisted on seeing folkloric material as relics from an earlier stage of civilization and instead came to view their subjects as members of living, functioning communities. As such, the article shows how these folklore collectors made major contributions to the emergence of a culturally-relativist outlook in the human sciences at the turn of the century.

Folklore Studies, Fieldwork and the Making of a Domestic Anthropology in

Fin-de-Siècle Britain

The discipline of ‘folkloristics’, as it is now known, today occupies a marginal place in the academy, and this marginality has coloured many retellings of its history. A standard account might go something like this. Folklore studies originated sometime in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, when documenting the oral traditions of the countryside became the pastime of antiquarian scholars and romantic nationalists.¹ Towards the end of the century, it enjoyed a brief heyday in Britain as it secured an alliance with the expanding discipline of anthropology.² However, the border lines between folklore and anthropology were never very clearly drawn, and in any case folkloristics was always bound to be torn between its literary-philological and social-scientific inclinations.³ Eventually the social sciences professionalized and moved into new conceptual territory, and in so doing eclipsed what was always their poorer, less intellectually mature relation.⁴ The remaining adherents of British folklore studies were left to form an unsightly alliance of dilettantes, revivalists, nationalists and even outright fascists.⁵

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¹ Giuseppe Cocchiara, *The History of Folklore in Europe* (Philadelphia, 1981); Roger D. Abrahams, ‘Phantoms of romantic nationalism in folkloristics’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 106/419 (1993), pp. 3–37; Matthew Cheeseman and Carina Hart (eds.), *Folklore and Nation in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2021).

² George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1991), pp. 53–62; Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London, 1968), chs 6–10.

³ Gillian Bennett, ‘The Thomsian heritage in the Folklore Society’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 33/3 (1996), pp. 212–20; Chris Wingfield and Chris Gosden, ‘An imperialist folklore? establishing the Folk-Lore Society in London’, in Timothy Baycroft and David M. Hopkin (eds), *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe during the Long Nineteenth Century*, (Leiden, 2012), pp. 255–74.

⁴ Gillian Bennett, ‘Geologists and folklorists: Cultural evolution and “the science of folklore”’, *Folklore*, 105/1–2 (1994), pp. 25–37; Chris Wingfield, ‘From Greater Britain to Little England’, *Museum History Journal*, 4/2 (2011), pp. 245–66.

⁵ For instance, Dave Harker, ‘May Cecil Sharp be praised?’, *History Workshop*, 14 (1982), pp. 44–62; Matthew Jefferies and Mike Tyldesley (eds), *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature, and Culture in Interwar Britain* (Farnham,

The article that follows makes a different assessment of the significance of folklore research. It argues that, in late nineteenth-century Britain, folkloristics did make major contributions to the development of anthropological science. These contributions, however, only become properly apparent when we look outside the canon of (mostly male) eminent thinkers and instead examine the activities of the (mostly female) fieldworkers doing what was sometimes regarded as the grunt-work of folklore collection.⁶ Operating through local antiquarian and natural history societies as well as the national Folk Lore Society, these fieldworkers, often geographically disparate, came to be bound together by the period's rich cultures of print and associational life. Together, they discussed and developed sophisticated practices for dealing with the problems of cultural translation and representation that were necessarily implicated in an ethnographic enterprise like folkloristics. By the century's end, they had even helped to propel first-hand fieldwork to a newfound position of prestige in metropolitan scholarship.

The decisive contribution of these collectors was primarily a methodological one, a shift from one style of fieldwork to another. In an admittedly awkward mix of agricultural and geological metaphors, I will call these styles 'gleaning' and 'quarrying'.⁷ If the former approach viewed folkloric ethnographic facts like crops lying on the ground, past their useful life and ready for collection, then the latter required a more concerted effort to mine below the surface and probe more deeply into a given cultural context. Building on a longer tradition of local

2011); Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester, 1993); Katie Meheux, 'A Scottish Volk? Folklore, anthropology, race and nationalism in inter-war Scotland', in Matthew Cheeseman and Carina Hart (eds), *Folklore and Nation in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2021), pp. 146–62; for a reassessment, see Laura Carter, 'Rethinking folk culture in twentieth-century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/4 (2017), pp. 543–69.

⁶ I take some inspiration here from John Ashton, 'Beyond survivalism: Regional folkloristics in late-Victorian England', *Folklore*, 108/1–2 (1997), pp. 19–23.

⁷ I take these designations from, respectively: W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'A gleaner's vision', *Folklore*, 106/1–2 (1995), pp. 71–6; Jeremy Vetter, 'Field life in the American West: Surveys, networks, stations, and quarries', in Kristian Hvidtfelt Nielsen, Michael Harbsmeier and Christopher Jacob Ries (eds), *Scientists and Scholars in the Field: Studies in the History of Fieldwork and Expeditions* (Aarhus, 2012), pp. 225–58.

(normally county-based) studies, it was ‘quarrying’ that folklorists made their dominant mode of research in the years around 1900. What was crucial about this move, though, was that in making it, folklore collectors also began to generate friction with the prevailing theoretical architecture of the discipline. ‘Quarrying’, after all, meant viewing the subjects of folklore research holistically and ethnographically: as functioning ways of life more than merely, as in the then-prevailing social-evolutionist account, leftovers from prehistory.⁸ In other words, folklorists did ‘at home’ what their contemporaries in anthropology have been celebrated for doing ‘abroad’: carving out conceptual space, via their field practices, for thinking about homeland ‘cultures’ in plural and relativistic terms.⁹

In this way, these fieldworkers constituted ‘communities of knowledge making’ in a double sense. They acted *as* a community, one formed by the communal pursuit of folkloric knowledge. But in emphasizing the unity and integrity of ‘traditional’ folk-cultures dotted across the British archipelago, they also helped to reshape understandings of what a community was, and what its significance might be. Understanding how this came to be – and came to be missed – requires us first to revisit the very origins of British folklore studies.

Scraps and gleanings

Famously, the word ‘folk-lore’ (as it was then written) entered the English language on 22 August 1846. Its inventor, the journalist, antiquary and civil servant William Thoms, suggested it in a letter to the *Athenaeum* as a ‘good Saxon compound’ for ‘what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature’. His hope was that his new coinage might spark

⁸ On ‘survivals’ as the predominant form of folkloristic research in this period, see Margaret T. Hodgen, ‘The doctrine of survivals: The history of an idea’, *American Anthropologist*, 33/3 (1931), pp. 307–24.

⁹ The literature on anthropology and cultural relativism is enormous, but a digestible account is Peter Mandler, *Return from the Natives: How Margaret Mead Won the Second World War and Lost the Cold War* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

a renewed effort to collect and document ‘the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs &c., of the olden time’.¹⁰ As he pointed out, he was not the first to take an interest in such matters. By this point, there were a good deal of antiquaries working to collect ‘popular literature’, mostly on Britain’s Celtic fringe. But by directly soliciting contributions from readers, Thoms was aiming to do something quite different from his forerunners. A media-savvy cultural entrepreneur, Thoms recognized that the mid-century advent of mass print could help him improve the speed and scale of folklore collection by reconceiving it as a new kind of networked research.¹¹

Thoms’s venture was both less and more successful than he had hoped. He never managed to produce what he anticipated would be the major scholarly outcome of collecting folklore in this way: an English version of Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*.¹² At the same time, his letter set in motion a vast outpouring of enthusiastic correspondence. Despite the *Athenaeum* editors’ caution against inviting a ‘shower of trivial communication’, an initial wave of responses to his *Athenaeum* article reported on topics as diverse as cuckoo songs, remedies for sore eyes, and techniques for planting myrtle slips.¹³ The following year, Thoms founded a new antiquarian journal, *Notes & Queries*, with a section similarly dedicated to items of ‘readers’ lore’.¹⁴ Over the next few decades, his approach spread to many new publications. By the 1870s, columns with titles like ‘tales and traditions’ and ‘local customs and folk-lore’ could be found widely across the provincial press.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ambrose Merton, ‘Folk-Lore’, *Athenaeum*, 22 August 1846, p. 863.

¹¹ See Hannes Mandel, ‘Readers’ Lore: Media, Literature, and the Making of Folk-Lore’ (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2018).

¹² Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1835).

¹³ Merton, ‘Folk-Lore’, p. 863; ‘P. P.’, ‘Wiltshire rhymes on the Cuckoo’, *Athenaeum*, 12 September 1846; ‘A. D.’, ‘Folk-Lore: Planting Myrtles’, *Athenaeum*, 5 February 1848; ‘A. D.’, ‘Folk-Lore: Holy-Thursday rains’, *Athenaeum*, 5 February 1848.

¹⁴ ‘Notices to correspondents’, *Notes and Queries*, 2 February 1850.

¹⁵ A list of these newspapers was provided in Thomas Ratcliffe, ‘A Folk-Lore Society’, *Notes and Queries*, 3 June 1876 and included the *Derbyshire Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, and the *Bradford Observer*.

The tendency occasioned by this new media environment was for folkloric material to appear in the form of what many writers called ‘scraps’, isolated data points that could be textualized, circulated, and reassembled in new forms.¹⁶ By collating and sending ‘scraps’ of folklore into a journal such as *Notes & Queries*, collectors could rematerialize cultural phenomena as *objets trouvés*. Thoms’s own metaphor for this process was ‘gleaning’, the garnering and bundling of ‘the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop’.¹⁷ His invocation was intended to highlight the urgency of collecting folkloric material, but the image of the gleaner pulling together scattered detritus would remain a powerful one in folkloristic research.

When the pages of *Notes & Queries* played host to a discussion about a proposed new Folk Lore Society in 1876, it was precisely this gleaning role that participants had in mind for it. Participants in the discussion agreed that the primary purpose of the society should be in ‘collecting, arranging, and printing all the *scattered bits* of folk-lore which we read of in books and hear of in the flesh’.¹⁸ The society’s first annual report repeated the same language when announcing itself as an organization devoted to ‘the reprinting of scarce books or articles on English Folk-Lore, and the collection and printing of scattered materials now existing in English olden-time literature’.¹⁹

Much has been made of the tensions surrounding the founding of the Folklore Society, in particular the uneasy coexistence between the ‘Thomsian’ and ‘anthropological’ schools of

¹⁶ Including in the very first edition of the new *Folk-Lore Record*. See Charlotte Latham, ‘Some West Sussex superstitions lingering in 1868’, *The Folk-Lore Record*, 1 (1878), p. 1.

¹⁷ Merton, ‘Folk-Lore’. See also Nicolaisen, ‘A gleaner’s vision’.

¹⁸ An old Folk-Lorist, ‘A Folk-Lore Society’, *Notes and Queries*, 1 July 1876. St. Swithin, ‘A folk-lore society’, *Notes and Queries*, s5-V (1876), p. 124. This debate is also summarized in Wingfield and Gosden, ‘An imperialist folklore?’, pp. 261–62.

¹⁹ ‘The Folk-Lore Society: First annual report of the council’, *Folk-Lore Record*, 2 (1879), p. 5.

folklore research.²⁰ If the Thomsian school was nationalist and philological in its inclinations, then the anthropologists took a global and comparative view. This was the heyday of ‘sociocultural evolutionism’, when anthropology’s avowed task was to reconstruct a single, linear account of the development of civilization. In this paradigm, folkloric material – understood as evidence of pre-rational beliefs – discovered in the supposedly ‘advanced’ nations of Europe could be cast as ‘survivals’ of earlier stages of cultural development.²¹ It could then be compared with the folklore from non-European societies to assess the degree of their ‘primitiveness’. It was a very different figuring of the value of folklore than Thoms’s ambition to salvage a national literature.

At the same time, the ‘gleaner’s vision’ that Thoms promoted cut across these divisions. In fact, despite Thoms’s desire to focus on English lore, one might say that this vision was *more* readily assimilable to a global, cosmopolitan folklore project than a nationalist one, as there was no need for arbitrary limits on the places from which material might be gathered. Early respondents to Thoms’s *Athenaeum* letter often disregarded his plea for Teutonic, English material, instead promiscuously mixing items from Ireland, Wales, and Scotland with items from the south and west of England.²² The ‘anthropological school’ that gained in strength during the 1880s (Thoms died in 1885) cast the net further still. The first editorial in the revamped *Folklore* journal in 1890 ended with a call for readers to submit any ‘instances of popular “superstition”, legend, or practice that still linger in the British Islands or in the outlying parts of the British Empire’.²³

²⁰ Wingfield and Gosden, ‘An imperialist folklore?’; Bennett, ‘The Thomsian heritage in the Folklore Society’; Wingfield, ‘From Greater Britain to Little England’. The first use of the term ‘anthropological school’ I have seen came from Marian Roalfe Cox, *An Introduction to Folklore* (London, 1897), p. 322.

²¹ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London, 1871) chaps 3–4; also Hodgen, ‘The doctrine of survivals’.

²² For instance, ‘H.’, ‘Folk-Lore: superstitions concerned with rocks and stones’, *Athenaeum*, 28 November 1846.

²³ ‘Editorial’, *Folklore*, 1/1 (1890), p. 3.

Even as folkloristics came to distance itself from its Thomsian beginnings, then, it still sought to rely on a methodological practice that dealt in scraps and gleanings. The geographical limits were wider, and the kind of material that counted was more expansive – the same editorial noted how the discipline had moved on from ‘unconsidered trifles of popular thought and usage’ and now addressed ‘the larger and more definite products of the popular mind’ – but the method was broadly the same.²⁴ Cultural traits could be culled at the periphery, turned into isolatable data points, and funnelled back via an epistolary network to the centre of calculation, where they could be reassembled and displayed in new relations with each other. It was an essentially museological imagining of the folkloristic project: culture made material and collectable.²⁵

It was precisely this kind of ethnographic practice that formed the basis of the society’s standardized set of instructions to folklore collectors it issued in 1890, the *Handbook of Folklore*. Modelled on the Anthropological Institute’s own equivalent, its *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, the folklore handbook aimed itself at anyone interested in exploring ‘the less advanced classes in cultured nations’.²⁶ Yet the authors were also clear that their aim was to generate data that could be made commensurable with the results of anthropological enquiry. Chapters were supplied by well-connected writers within anthropological circles, and the book was divided into four sections, each with its own list of questions for fieldworkers to find answers to: ‘are caves objects of fear?’ ‘how is the sky accounted for?’²⁷ Reminding its readers of the ‘absolute precision and faithfulness’ with which data were to be recorded, the book

²⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁵ Oliver Douglas, ‘The material culture of folklore: British ethnographic collections between 1890 and 1900’ (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2010); Chris Wingfield, ‘Is the heart at home? E. B. Tylor’s collections from Somerset’, *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 22 (2009), pp. 22–38.

²⁶ George Laurence Gomme (ed.), *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1890), p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

instructed collectors to note the exact location, date and source of each folkloric item.²⁸ It nonetheless made little distinction between items collected from the ‘folk’ and items collected second hand. All material was usable, provided it could be made to fit inside the *Handbook’s* taxonomic classifications. Tellingly, the final chapter offered instructions on how to tabulate material gleaned from ‘library work’.

The kind of ‘field’ practice endorsed by the *Handbook’s* attempt to bring folklore collection in line with late-Victorian anthropology did not, ultimately, offer a secure route to imagining Britain’s folk cultures as living, form-giving figurations. The data were too dispersed, too infinitely replicable and comparable, too readily imagined as mere ‘scraps’ lying on the surface of social life. The ‘gleaner’s vision’ inaugurated by Thoms retained a tight grip even as the anthropologists took over the society, only now permitting folkloric gleanings to be packaged into pre-made classifications and pressed into global categorizations. However, if we look beyond the centralizing efforts of the national Folk Lore Society and instead at the actual practices of folklore collectors, we can see that the ‘scraps’ and ‘gleanings’ of folkloristic research were being assimilated into very different kinds of geographies.

A mine of great riches

A different metaphor for the process of folklore collection appeared in the 1879 republication of *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders*. Written by the antiquary William Henderson, the book opened with the author’s reflection that, on embarking on studying the folklore of the north of England, ‘the mine was one of great riches, and it was to some extent unworked’. This ‘mine’, for Henderson, was definitively regional: calling himself a ‘genuine North-countryman’, he proudly demarcated his territory as ‘the district

²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

between the Tweed and the Humber'.²⁹ In covering a wide area, he relied on a network of informants, mostly clergymen stationed around Durham and Yorkshire, as well as his own recollections.³⁰ His work, after a fashion, was also a collage of scraps and gleanings. But by assembling his material in this distinctly 'North-country' space, Henderson directed the rhetorical force of his text at chiselling out a sense of regional peculiarity. Frequent comparisons of his data with customs from other parts of the country – phrases like 'I have heard of the same belief in Suffolk', and 'the following form of divination seems purely Northumbrian' litter the text – reinforced this distinctiveness, allowing him to identify precisely what was unique and what was commonplace.³¹

Henderson's book was one iteration in a broad though diffuse tradition of antiquarian research into popular lore that stretched back to at least the seventeenth century. Originating in the (often polemical) interest clergymen took in the persistence of supposedly pre-Christian or pre-Reformation cultural practices in their parishes, the study of 'popular antiquities' soon spread among the leisured classes more widely.³² Here, accounts of local customs and beliefs were often intermingled with descriptions of local natural history and written up as broad topographical surveys.³³ By the middle of the nineteenth century, this style of research had acquired an even broader institutional setting, in the form of local field clubs that accommodated antiquarian and natural-historical interests under one roof. Offering a cheaper alternative to the more prestigious Natural History and Literary and Philosophical societies, these new hybrids became the predominant form of local scientific activity in the later

²⁹ William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London, 1879), p. vii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50–1.

³² Alexandra Walsham, 'Recording superstition in early modern Britain: The origins of folklore', *Past & Present*, 199, Supplement 3 (2008), pp. 178–206.

³³ Adam Fox, 'Printed questionnaires, research networks, and the discovery of the British Isles, 1650–1800', *Historical Journal*, 53/3 (2010), 593–621.

nineteenth century.³⁴ One estimate put the numbers of these clubs at 500 in 1904, with a total membership of 100,000.³⁵

As with Henderson, much of this work had a distinctly regional flavour, with most investigations being conducted and organized at the county level. Thomas Sternberg's *The dialect and folk-lore of Northamptonshire*, for instance, appeared only a few years after Thoms's letter, and was trailed in the *Athenaeum*'s folk-lore column.³⁶ Described as a collection of 'gleanings concerning the fairies', it also presented itself as an exposition of the 'traces of Teutonic heathenism to this day preserved among the rural population of Northamptonshire'.³⁷ Other efforts to collect local lore, such as the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, founded in 1853, also listed the study of local 'traditions and customs' as one of its ambitions, even appearing unaware of Thoms's coinage.³⁸

David Hopkin has suggested that regional collectors of popular antiquities seldom seemed to question, much less justify, their choice of geographical scale.³⁹ The county in this sense was merely a convenient container for work that could have taken place anywhere. Yet it is also the case that operating at this more local scale demanded a different kind of study from the global network of 'scrap' collectors Thoms and the anthropologists had set in motion. Not least here was the greater intensity that the work of collection required: the sense that the proper task of a local worker was to collect and document all the material, human and natural,

³⁴ David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), chap. 8.

³⁵ The estimate comes from *Report of the 74th meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1904*, (London, 1905), although this is for all 'scientific societies', rather than combined naturalist and antiquarian societies. The figure is also cited in Diarmid A. Finnegan, 'Natural history societies in late Victorian Scotland and the pursuit of local civic science', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 38/1 (2005), pp. 53–72.

³⁶ 'The dialect and folk-lore of Northamptonshire', *Athenaeum*, September 1851, p. 950.

³⁷ Thomas Sternberg, *The Dialect and Folk-Lore of Northamptonshire* (London, 1851), pp. iii–iv.

³⁸ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 46.

³⁹ David Hopkin, 'Regionalism and folklore', in Xosé M. Núñez Seixas and Eric Storm (eds), *Regionalism and Modern Europe* (London, 2018), pp. 44–64, at p. 46.

that could shed light on the distinctive features of the district.⁴⁰ As Philippa Levine has shown, that tendency was exacerbated in the later decades of the nineteenth century: as both the biological and the historical sciences professionalized, a more determined, more aggressively scientific strain of ‘militant localism’ followed in their wake.⁴¹

In this more localized context, folklore collection could be reenvisioned as one strand in a broader effort to build up comprehensive knowledges of geographically-delimited areas. Combining antiquarian interest in ‘popular antiquities’ with the fieldworking culture of natural history, collections of folkloric material could rank alongside compendia of local flora and fauna as some of the most significant outputs of local scientific societies. Folkloric materials could be assimilated into an old form of ‘inventory science’ that, as Suzanne Zeller has shown, was just as much about underwriting the territorial integrity of particular imagined communities as about making them legible.⁴² The Rev Dr Walter Gregor suggested as much in his address to the newly-formed Banffshire Field Club in 1881:

The name of the Society in a great measure indicates its aim – all that relates to Banffshire and north-western Aberdeenshire. Make this district then the chief work of the society, and strive to have the museum a representation of the county and neighbourhood. The work may be arranged in three divisions:

I. Topography

⁴⁰ Simon Naylor, ‘Collecting quoits: Field cultures in the history of Cornish antiquarianism’, *cultural geographies*, 10/3 (2003), pp. 309–33, at p. 316; Charles W. J. Withers and Diarmid A. Finnegan, ‘Natural history societies, fieldwork and local knowledge in nineteenth-century Scotland: Towards a historical geography of civic science’, *cultural geographies*, 10/3 (July 2003), pp. 334–53, at p. 338.

⁴¹ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 46; for the more aggressive ‘scientism’ in late Victorian natural history, see Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, ‘Amateurs and professionals in one county: Biology and natural history in late Victorian Yorkshire’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 34/1 (2001), pp. 115–47, at pp. 134–36; in some ways these arguments also correspond to Keith Snell’s about the persistence of local belonging and place-based identity well into the later nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity, and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁴² Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto, 1987), p. 5. Her ‘territory’ is Canada, but she notes that the kind of ‘inventory science’ that went on there developed from the parish inventories made by English clergymen in the eighteenth century.

- II. Natural History
- III. Antiquities⁴³

Hinting at the civic as well as the scientific function of local field clubs, Gregor made it plain that folklore (included under ‘antiquities’) ought to be considered as one of several branches of study that could shed light on the local area. Gregor’s own *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, published by the Folk Lore Society in the same year, was a contribution to that project.⁴⁴ Here, his inclination towards natural history rather than literature, to the region rather than the nation, was met by a correspondingly naturalistic presentation of the book’s contents. Gregor’s *Notes* offered almost no commentary on the items of lore contained within it. Gregor later became renowned for this mode of presentation: one review of a later book noted that ‘when we see Dr Gregor’s name attached to any work, we know what to expect, namely, original collections from the mouth of the folk, set down in business-like catalogues, with unrivalled precision of detail’.⁴⁵

In certain cases, too, these more intensive, localized collecting practices did lead fieldworkers into open reflection on the relevance of counties and regions as units of social organization. Charlotte Burne’s *Shropshire Folklore* (1883), for instance, carried the subtitle ‘a sheaf of gleanings’, but it is apparent from reading it that her ambitions were much loftier. The ‘gleanings’, in fact, belonged to a set of manuscripts on local dialect that Burne acquired in 1872 through her connections with the Severn Valley Naturalists’ Field Club.⁴⁶ Over the next ten years, Burne supplemented this work with her own observations and research. In the

⁴³ Walter Gregor, ‘Objects and methods of field clubs’, *Transactions of the Banffshire Field Club* (November 1881), p. 4.

⁴⁴ Walter Gregor, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* (London, 1881).

⁴⁵ ‘Review of *Kilns, mills, millers, meal, and bread*’, *Folklore*, 6/4 (1895), p. 390.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Burne (ed.), *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings from the Notebooks of Georgina F. Jackson* (2 vols, London, 1883), p. vii.

resulting book she not only aimed for ‘scientific’ precision in the recording of her material – every source was named, all her items neatly arranged – but also took on the role of theorist, posing herself the question of what, exactly, it was that made Shropshire distinctive. Her contention was that it was only possible to answer that question by addressing both ‘the history of [the] district, [...] by what races it has been peopled, to what external influences it has been subjected, and under what conditions its people have lived and died’ as well as the ‘influence’ of the ‘physical configuration of the county’ on the ‘minds and habits of the inhabitants’.⁴⁷ The glowing review it received in *Folklore* noted that it was the first book on folklore to contain a map.⁴⁸

By constituting her field site as simultaneously a point in historical, geographical, and social space, Burne was able to proceed beyond the role of gleaner and instead ask how the cultural material she collected had assumed its shape. Curiously enough, her answer foregrounded Shropshire’s status as a border county, forged by many influences.⁴⁹ So while she was able to present a holistic picture of the county and its mode of life, she was also careful not to seal it off in its own hermetic container. This was, in fact, the kind of ethnographic analysis that W. H. R. Rivers would later become famous for.⁵⁰ And by placing emphasis on the conditions under which Shropshire’s folklore had persisted, Burne was also able to count it as part of a living and evolving symbolic economy. Her preface recorded her hope that the book would find an audience as much among residents of Shropshire as among students of folklore.⁵¹

A key tension, then, in the early formation of British folklore studies was not only the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 614.

⁴⁸ ‘Review of Shropshire Folk-Lore: a sheaf of gleanings’, *Folk-Lore Journal*, 4/4 (1886), p. 366.

⁴⁹ Burne, *Shropshire Folklore*, p. 635.

⁵⁰ Especially in his *The History of Melanesian Society* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1914); cf. Edvard Hviding and Cato Berg, *The Ethnographic Experiment: A.M. Hocart and W.H.R. Rivers in Island Melanesia, 1908* (New York, 2014).

⁵¹ Burne, *Shropshire Folklore*, p. x.

well-rehearsed one between a Tylorian, ‘anthropological’ approach and a Thomsian, nationalist one, but also between research conducted in ‘gleaning’ mode and research conducted in ‘quarrying’ mode. If one favoured a networked form of inquiry, pulling its data from many places, the other favoured a deeper excavation of its site. Understanding the different geographies of these field practices helps us to appreciate two points. The first is a point already well understood within science studies: that a discipline’s objects of enquiry are in part constituted by the practices that bring them into view.⁵² Henderson’s ‘north country’, Gregor’s Banffshire and Burne’s Shropshire were not only containers of folkloric information but the very products of their field study. The second, more important point is that by construing their objects in this way these authors created the conditions for tentative assault on the comparativist methodologies that nourished prevailing evolutionist approaches to folklore. Conducting detailed studies of particular counties could serve to highlight the ‘survivals’ from the evolutionary past, but it could also help to build up fuller accounts of regional cultures that posited them as integrated complexes of history, place, and people. In the hands of the collectors operating in the 1870s and 1880s, this notion was, admittedly, inchoate, though elements of it can be detected in Charlotte Burne’s work. But fuller elaboration, building on the work of these antiquaries and natural historians, would be supplied by the move towards a more insistently ‘scientific’ style of folkloristic research that took root in the 1890s, as we will now see.

The real inward life of a people

⁵² An argument made in condensed form in John Law and John Urry, ‘Enacting the social’, *Economy and Society*, 33/3 (2004), pp. 390–410; but as Fraser MacDonald notes, one that has not been pursued in any great depth by historians of science. See Fraser MacDonald, ‘Doomsday fieldwork, or, how to rescue Gaelic culture? The salvage paradigm in geography, archaeology, and folklore, 1955 – 62’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29/2 (2011), pp. 309–35, at p. 313.

As one erstwhile president of the Folk Lore Society keenly noted, the years around the turn of the century were crucial in elevating the practice of fieldwork to new heights. The ‘fascination of the unknown and obscure’, he wrote, was now yielding to more systematic investigations of ‘familiar ground’; ‘explorers’ were becoming ‘surveyors’; and the ‘ordnance map’, ‘measuring chain’, and ‘plotting board’ were superseding the ‘rough sketch’.⁵³ Several factors had conspired in transforming the discipline into a more rigorous enterprise. The first was the growing degree of international cross-collaboration in folkloristics. The 1880s and 1890s saw a wave of national folklore societies being established across Europe, and international congresses, held first in Paris in 1889 and then in London in 1891, brought folklorists together to discuss future directions for the discipline. Some key figures of this moment, such as Paul Sébillot in France and Antonio Machado y Álvarez in Spain, were especially keen on turning folklore into a spatial science.⁵⁴ Using maps to plot precisely the distribution of traditions, tales, and beliefs, they felt, would lead to a deeper understanding of processes of cultural contact, diffusion, and change. Both folklorists were important influences on, and correspondents with, Charlotte Burne and her generation of English folklorists.

A second development arrived from the world of colonial anthropology, where figures like Baldwin Spencer in Australia, Franz Boas in north-western Canada, and Alfred Cort Haddon in the Torres Strait, were undertaking landmark anthropological studies based on direct, first-hand fieldwork.⁵⁵ The emergence of this ‘scholar-fieldworker’ in the 1890s underlined the value of probing more deeply and holistically into other societies, and of placing cultural phenomena in their cultural context.⁵⁶ The ‘detailed researches’ of ethnologists

⁵³ Alfred Nutt, ‘Presidential address: Britain and folklore’, *Folklore*, 10/1 (1899), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Hopkin, ‘Regionalism and folklore’, p. 47.

⁵⁵ Franz Boas, ‘The social organization and the secret societies of the Kwakiutl Indians’, *Report of the U. S. National Museum for 1895* (Washington, DC, 1896), pp. 311–738.

⁵⁶ Henrika Kuklick, ‘Islands in the Pacific: Darwinian biogeography and British anthropology’, *American Ethnologist*, 23/3 (1996), pp. 611–38.

working ‘in other quarters of the globe’, according to one president of the Folk Lore Society, offered ‘only too much cause to harden our hearts, if not to roughen our tongues, against that impertinent person the writer of scraps’.⁵⁷

A third impetus to ‘scientific’ fieldwork came from within British folkloristics itself, in particular from the writings of George Laurence Gomme, one of the Folk Lore Society’s founders and its president in the 1890s. Gomme was, admittedly, not a fieldworker himself, but had long been suspicious of evolutionist theories and the comparative, ‘scrap’-based methods on which they were built.⁵⁸ The ‘historical’ or ‘ethnological’ method for studying folklore he developed and promoted in the 1890s, as the anthropologist R. R. Marett once remarked, ‘consist[ed] in having formulated the principle of method that institutions need, first and foremost, to be studied in their local context. Intensive ethnographical research is the necessary prius of comparative ethnology’.⁵⁹ In 1892, Gomme teamed up with Haddon, among others, to establish a programme for what became the Ethnographic Survey of the United Kingdom. Once again, work conducted for the survey would be based on a methodological principle that would come to be deeply associated with anthropological research around this time: the ‘intensive study of limited areas’.⁶⁰ The survey employed local naturalist and archaeological societies to make detailed studies of villages thought to have been relatively unaffected by historical flows of migration. The hope was that this might offer insights into the ‘racial history’ of Britain.

The ethnographic survey project turned out not to be a huge success, for reasons that

⁵⁷ Hartland, ‘Presidential Address’, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Especially in G. L. Gomme, *Ethnology in folklore* (London, 1892).

⁵⁹ R. R. Marett, ‘Presidential address. the psychology of culture-contact’, *Folklore*, 28/4 (March 1917), pp.13–35, at p. 26.

⁶⁰ George W. Stocking, “‘The intensive study of limited areas’: Toward an ethnographic context for the Malinowski innovation’, *History of Anthropology Newsletter*, 6/2 (1979), pp. 9–12.

have been explored elsewhere.⁶¹ What is important to note, however, is that the work the survey's organizers envisaged was precisely kind of cultural-anthropological research that many local field clubs and antiquarian societies were already undertaking. As one organizer pointed out, in the seven years between 1885 and 1892, 'at least' one hundred individuals from thirty-three societies had produced over 200 papers on matters relating to 'local' anthropology.⁶² The longstanding 'quarrying' model of local antiquarian research thus mapped on very closely, and could easily be assimilated into, the new push for 'scientific' fieldwork in the 1890s.

Among folklore collectors, this push served to generate a new and thorough set of discussions about the kinds of qualities that made for effective research. What emerged from these discussions was an ostensible paradox: the more that folkloristics' scientific credentials were emphasized, the more it was acknowledged that folklore collection required emotional as well as technical expertise, 'residential' as well as 'cosmopolitan' knowledge.⁶³ It was not enough simply to apply the latest anthropological theory to folklore collection. Familiarity with local life and landscape, as well as a power to win the confidence of the 'folk', were also necessary if collectors were to seriously pursue the kind of intensive survey that figures like Gomme and Haddon promoted. These qualities were strongly gendered as well as classed, as we will see.

A reviewer, for instance, of an 1899 collection of *Shetland Folklore* – a late example of

⁶¹ James Urry, 'Englishmen, Celts, and Iberians: The Ethnographic Survey of the United Kingdom, 1892–1899', in James Urry (ed.), *Before Social Anthropology: Essays on the History of British Anthropology* (London, 1993), pp. 83–101.

⁶² E. W. Brabrook, 'On the organisation of local anthropological research', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 22 (1893), p. 266. This was a fuller version of the paper he read at the 1892 BAAS meeting. See E. W. Brabrook, 'On the organisation of local anthropological research', *Report of the 62nd Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1892* (London, 1893), p. 896.

⁶³ The terms come from Robert E. Kohler, 'Finders, keepers: Collecting sciences and collecting practice', *History of Science*, 45/4 (2007), pp. 428–54, at p. 436.

an older style of antiquarian research – dismissed its compiler on the grounds that he was not a ‘scientific folklorist’: he had not shown much precision in his recording. Yet the same reviewer also praised him for offering a picture of the ‘real inward life of a people’ that ‘could only be drawn by one familiar with their daily life and occupations’.⁶⁴ The compiler, John Spence, had been collecting ‘sayings and superstitions’ for over forty years.⁶⁵ Here was a case where the deep immersion of the collector in native life was in abundance, the corresponding attention to the kinds of questions folkloristics hoped to answer was lacking. The most-admired collectors, including the Celtic scholar John Rhÿs, were commonly identified to possess both. Doing most of his collecting in his native Wales, Rhÿs was commended not only for his expert grasp of ethnological issues, but for his ability to speak the Welsh language ‘as one of themselves’. Perhaps most significantly, Rhÿs’s personal qualities, his ‘perseverance, sense of humour, genial bonhomie’ were all regarded as critical to his collecting practice; he was even praised for eliciting material from ‘a peasant-woman casually met at a railway station’.⁶⁶ As Rhÿs himself noted, ‘folkloring’ was as much a ‘knack’ as a science.⁶⁷

The person who offered the most developed and sustained reflections on the qualities, personal and technical, needed to become a ‘scientific folklorist’ was Charlotte Burne. After the publication of her *Shropshire Folklore*, Burne became widely regarded as the foremost expert on collecting in the Folk Lore Society, and forged alliances with the figures in the organization most committed to recasting folkloristics in a ‘scientific’ idiom, Gomme chief among them.⁶⁸ In 1910 she took up the presidency of the Folk Lore Society, becoming, she

⁶⁴ Florence Peacock, ‘Review of *Shetland folk-lore*’, *Folklore*, 11/3 (1900), p. 316.

⁶⁵ John Spence, *Shetland Folk-Lore*, (Lerwick, 1899), p. 8.

⁶⁶ For instance, the glowing review he received in *Folklore*. See ‘Review of *Celtic folklore, Welsh and Manx*’, *Folklore*, 12/1 (1901), p. 114.

⁶⁷ John Rhÿs to Edwin Sidney Hartland, 24 December 1896. Folder 15000 (‘Fleure’), Haddon Papers, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge.

⁶⁸ Gordon Ashman and Gillian Bennett, ‘Charlotte Sophia Burne: Shropshire folklorist, first woman President of the Folklore Society, and first woman Editor of *Folklore*. Part 1: A life and appreciation’, *Folklore*, 111/1

recounted, the first woman to occupy that role in any learned society in Europe.⁶⁹ She contributed a number of articles on the art and science of folkloristic fieldwork to the society's journal, and in 1914 repackaged them into a new edition of the society's *Handbook*.⁷⁰ Although much of the advice she gave to collectors consisted of practical tips about whom to consult, what kinds of questions a collector ought to ask, and how to phrase them, much of her writing could also be read as a rumination on the epistemological problems posed by cultural boundaries. For Burne, folkloric materials were not like 'scraps' waiting to be picked off the ground, but were instead treasured cultural possessions residing in the innermost recesses of the psyche. Accessing these materials required not only tact and perseverance, but a transformation of the self on the part of the folklorist.

As a start, Burne generally recommended the use of trusted informants among the 'educated people of the neighbourhood', a fact that has been read as an essential unwillingness to consult the subjects of research directly.⁷¹ But Burne did consult them too, and in any case was clear that the use of informants was a way of tapping into relationships built on trust rather than mutual suspicion. Lawyers, doctors, and land-agents were generally preferred to clergymen or schoolmasters, since 'the people are apt to keep superstition out of [the] way' of figures they regarded, by 'social rank or official position', as occupying positions of too much cultural authority.⁷² Among the 'folk' themselves, she also recommended characters felt most

(2000), pp. 1–21, at pp. 10–11; Gillian Bennett, 'Charlotte Sophia Burne: Shropshire folklorist, first woman President of the Folklore Society, and first woman Editor of Folklore. Part 2: update and preliminary bibliography', *Folklore*, 112/1 (2001), pp. 95–106.

⁶⁹ Charlotte Sophia Burne, 'Presidential Address: The value of European folklore in the history of culture', *Folklore*, 21/1 (1910), pp. 14–41, at p. 14.

⁷⁰ Charlotte Sophia Burne, (ed.), *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1914).

⁷¹ Charlotte S. Burne, 'The collection of English folk-lore', *Folklore*, 1/3 (1890), pp. 313–30, at p. 326; this claim about Burne is made in Mark Freeman, 'Folklore collection and social investigation in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century England', *Folklore* 116/1 (2005), pp. 51–65, at pp. 56–8; who leans heavily on Catherine Marsh, 'Informants, respondents and citizens', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 206–27.

⁷² Burne, 'The collection of English folk-lore', p. 327; Charlotte Sophia Burne, 'Introduction: What folklore is', in Charlotte Sophia Burne (ed.), *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1914), p. 8.

likely to speak openly: the ‘oldest inhabitants’ of the village, the ‘village innkeeper’ and anyone whose ‘work is irregular’.⁷³ If guardedness was one issue the collector had to confront, another concerned the authenticity of folkloric evidence itself. The trouble with probing into folk beliefs, she pointed out, was that the ‘folk’ were, by definition, unaware that their beliefs were folk beliefs.⁷⁴ The same was true of matters relating to language: in one account of ‘Staffordshire lore’, she recalled that she had had a hard time distinguishing between ‘standard proverbs’ and ‘improvised ones’, given the peculiarities of the local dialect.⁷⁵ To circumvent the problem, she, on a number of occasions, recommended the use of informants who, via some amount of ‘education’, were able to practice a degree of ironic detachment from their own cultural practices – who already realised that their beliefs and customs were likely to be of ethnographic value.⁷⁶

According to Burne, however, the most authentic folklore items, the most precious ‘pearls in the oyster-beds’, were those that only revealed themselves incidentally, after prolonged exposure: ‘the best collecting is that which is done by accident, by living among the people and garnering up the sayings and stories they let fall from time to time’.⁷⁷ Although this last quotation hints at some lingering influence of the practice of ‘gleaning’, when combined with Burne’s later encouragements to view local folk culture as a ‘*whole* to be examined and analysed’, we can see that she was putting a different spin on the procedure.⁷⁸ Moreover, the implication that cultural phenomena possessed a repressed quality, sequestered in parts of the folk psyche that only revealed themselves at unpredictable moments, seems both strikingly modernist and strikingly common among those who discussed folklore collection at the turn of

⁷³ Burne, ‘The collection of English folk-lore’, p. 328.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁷⁵ C. S. Burne, ‘Staffordshire folk and their lore’, *Folklore*, 7/4 (1896), pp. 366–86, at p. 377.

⁷⁶ Burne, ‘The collection of English folk-lore’, p. 329.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 322, 326.

⁷⁸ Burne, ‘Essential unity of folklore’, p. 26.

the century. It was around this time, for example, that the Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen was likening folklore collecting to ‘rummag[ing]’ in a ‘lumber-room’, where ‘it is very possible that the very best lies at the bottom’.⁷⁹ Another collector, the colonial official and amateur anthropologist of Malay society Walter William Skeat, used hunting as his (somewhat clumsy) analogy: ‘the “savage idea”, as Mary Kingsley used to say, has to be stalked’, but the more directly it was pursued, the harder it was to catch.⁸⁰

It would be remiss at this point not to comment on the gendered dynamics of these discussions. Part of the reason Burne was able to attain the influential position she did within folkloristic circles stemmed from the earlier, rigid separation between fieldwork and theory in ethnographic study.⁸¹ Theory was the preserve of the male scholar, while collecting could be delegated as women’s work.⁸² But as figures like Haddon increasingly combined the two roles in the same person by the turn of the century, and as efforts were made to stress the ‘scientific’ character of fieldwork, women with experience of field collecting – like Burne, but one could equally count Eliza Gutch, Mabel Peacock, Eveline Camilla Gurdon, Ella Mary Leather, Ada Goodrich-Freer, and D. H. Moutray Read – were granted newfound authority. This revaluation of fieldwork did not, of course, prompt a wholesale admission of women into the male world of folkloristic and anthropological scholarship. But it did allow for the traits most associated with feminized collecting to be counted as part of the methodological toolkit of the ‘scientific folklorist’. Those traits included tact and empathy, but also an underlying *nearness* to the

⁷⁹ Palle O. Christiansen, ‘From collection to fieldwork: The field research of Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen, 1870-1890’, in Kristian Hvidtfelt Nielsen, Michael Harbsmeier, and Christopher Jacob Ries (eds), *Scientists and Scholars in the Field: Studies in the History of Fieldwork and Expeditions* (Aarhus, 2012), p. 220.

⁸⁰ Walter Skeat, ‘The collection of folklore’, *Folklore*, 13/3 (1902), p. 308.

⁸¹ Lyn Schumaker, ‘Women in the field in the twentieth century: Revolution, involution, devolution?’, in Henrika Kuklick (ed.), *New History of Anthropology* (Oxford, 2007), p. 280.

⁸² William Thoms had in the 1870s made the suggestion that ‘ladies should be specially invited to take part in the work’ of folklore collection. Quoted in Wingfield and Gosden, ‘An imperialist folklore?’, p. 262; A similar suggestion was made by James Long, a missionary stationed in India. See J. Long, ‘Proverbs: English and Keltic, with their eastern relations’, *Folk-Lore Record*, 3 (1880), p. 79.

subjects of research that derived from women's worldly position in the middle-class household.⁸³ As Burne intimated, folklore collectors often acquired an interest in the subject through their close dealings with their own servants, or else from having been 'brought up' in the 'old-world atmosphere' of the English village.⁸⁴ Similarly, she also pointed out that the route to folkloristics for several women originated in the greater opportunities they had for observing the activities of children, figures who were generally viewed by folklorists either in racialized terms, as effective vectors of ancestral 'tradition', or in recapitulation-theory terms, as possessors of 'savage'-like mental structures.⁸⁵

By the turn of the century, male folklorists were increasingly claiming the epistemic privileges of gendered fieldwork practices for themselves too, though not without some psychic cost. Sidney Oldall Addy, as we have seen, offered a highly developed set of reflections on the personal skills required for fieldworkers to 'project' themselves into strange 'habits of thought'. But he did so with an underlying rancour directed against the male stay-at-home scholars in the Folk Lore Society. When he wrote that 'it is so much easier, and so much pleasanter, to theorize than to collect!', he was presumably making a rear-guard effort to insist on the hardy masculine virtues of field science.⁸⁶ One finds, by contrast, no evidence of frustration with the supposedly subordinate position of collecting in the work of any female folklorist. Burne, in fact, had always been one to overperform her deference to metropolitan systematizers, at one point asking for instructions that would not be 'too elaborate for the weaker brethren, or at all

⁸³ Burne had laid out these traits in 'Classification of Folk-Lore', *Folk-Lore Journal*, 4/2 (1886), p. 161.

⁸⁴ See Charlotte S. Burne, 'Reminiscences of Lancashire and Cheshire when George IV was king', *Folklore*, 20/2 (1909), pp. 203–4; Charlotte S. Burne and J. J. Foster, 'Some simple methods of promoting the study of folk-lore, and the extension of the Folk-Lore Society', *Folk-Lore Journal*, 5 (1887), pp. 62–4, at p. 62.

⁸⁵ Burne, 'The value of European folklore', p. 15; the idea that children were useful folkloric subjects was discussed throughout the history of folkloristics. For an early example, see John Fenton, 'Folk-Lore in relation to psychology and education', *Folk-Lore Journal*, 1 (1883), pp. 258–66; for a survey of these discussions, see Elizabeth Tucker, 'Changing concepts of childhood: Children's folklore scholarship since the late nineteenth century', *Journal of American Folklore*, 125/3 (2012), pp. 389–411.

⁸⁶ Addy, 'The collection of folklore', p. 297; for the 'masculinisation' of late-nineteenth century field science, see Kuklick, 'Personal Equations', pp. 12–13.

events for the *sisters*'.⁸⁷ Male folklorists also had more trouble, it seems, entirely abandoning the romantic precept that their skills as a fieldworker derived from a worthy desire to venture off the beaten track. As late as 1918, the Irish antiquary Thomas Johnson Westropp published a series of articles in *Folklore* claiming to have discovered an untouched community on the coast of Connacht. The region's authenticity as a folkloric subject supposedly derived from the fact that 'tourists are too rare for the establishment of that detestable by-product, the story-telling guide'.⁸⁸

All the same, the romanticism embedded in the collecting encounter became increasingly attenuated as folklorists made participant-observation-like practices the central methodological plank of the discipline. These were practices that favoured neither distance nor intimacy, but a combination of the two. The old romantic idea that folklorists shared some kind of inner correspondence of spirit with their informants was jettisoned in exchange for a form of practice that maintained the existence of cultural boundaries all the while affirming that they were there to be crossed. Collectors had to, as Burne put it, 'mingle familiarly with the folk', but they also had to be distant enough to know what kind of material was of most ethnographic value.⁸⁹

New textual and formal possibilities were also opened up as folklorists attempted to channel their informants' voices into authoritative, objective accounts of social life. Their hovering distance from the male world of metropolitan scholarship allowed some small space to experiment with representational practices that foregrounded the collaborative,

⁸⁷ Charlotte S. Burne, Antonio Machado y Alvarez, and E. Sidney Hartland, 'The science of folk-lore', *The Folk-Lore Journal*, 3/2 (1885), pp. 7–121.

⁸⁸ Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'A study of the folklore on the coast of Connacht, Ireland', *Folklore*, 29/4 (1918), pp. 305–19, at p. 306.

⁸⁹ Burne and Foster, 'Some simple methods of promoting the study of folk-lore', p. 62.

intersubjective dimension of ethnographic knowledge-making.⁹⁰ In a manner that surely would have pleased advocates for ‘dialogic’ or ‘polyphonic’ ethnographies in the 1980s, the Scottish folklorist Robert Craig Maclagan wrote his *Evil eye in the Western Highlands* (1902) almost entirely as a collage of extended quotations from his informants, first in Gaelic, and then in translation.⁹¹ Privileging verisimilitude over interpretive consistency, with all the surfeit of signification that entailed, Maclagan’s text presented in its formal expansiveness a disquisition on the uncertain status of the ethnographer as both creator and conduit of the words of others.

If the era spanning the decades either side of 1900 was an era in which the ‘scientific’ credentials of homeland ethnography were increasingly emphasized, then, it was also an era of formal experimentation. As the virtues of intensive fieldwork made themselves apparent to folklorists, they began to toy with novel forms of practice and representation in their quest to access the ‘real inward life of a people’ and convey how it generated its own realities and meanings. It also increasingly led those collectors to feel, as Charlotte Burne put it in 1904, that they had ‘long outgrown the idea that folklore is the mere barren “study of survivals”’. Articulating a newfound sense that the task of a folklorist was to examine an essentially living, mutating set of phenomena that could not easily be pigeonholed as relics from the deep past, Burne even opened a tentative border dispute with the nascent discipline of sociology. The establishment of the Sociological Society in 1903, she wrote, ought to prompt folklorists to examine the modern and the new much more closely than they ever had. Stressing the essential affinity between the two disciplines in their attention to ‘social institutions’, she asked the

⁹⁰ I draw my sense of how degrees of distance from male bourgeois individualism (both agonistic and conciliatory) produce novel forms of self-representation from Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (Oxford, 1991).

⁹¹ Robert Craig Maclagan, *Evil eye in the Western Highlands* (London, 1902); For ‘dialogic’ ethnography, see Kevin Dwyer, ‘The dialogic of ethnology’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 4/3 (1979), pp. 205–24; George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman, ‘Ethnographies as texts’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11 (1982), pp. 25–69; James Clifford, ‘On ethnographic authority’, *Representations*, 2 (1983), pp. 118–46, at p. 140.

readers of *Folklore* ‘why [...] we instinctively feel that the funeral pyre of the Hindoo comes within our scope, and the Crematorium at Woking does not?’ She cited the work of Emile Durkheim as a model of what could be done by blending an interest in anthropology, folklore, and modern sociology.⁹²

A local unity

Understanding folklore in sociological terms as modern, living and amenable to analysis via immersive fieldwork also increasingly led folklorists to research regions not traditionally well-served by earlier studies. Burne’s first presidential address to the Folk Lore Society pointed out some of the disparities in the kinds of places on which folklorists had traditionally focused their energies. Ireland, Wales, the Scottish Highlands, the north and west of England had all been fairly well covered; virtually nothing, by contrast, had been published for the south-east and east midlands.⁹³ Although she expressed her desire to rectify the situation, she was nonetheless careful to point out that her ambition for greater coverage would not mean a retreat into nationalism, either political or methodological, along the lines of the ‘German and Swiss Folklore Societies’.⁹⁴ Instead, she hoped that more evenly-dispersed holistic local study would more fully help to address questions about the relationship between history, environment and the distribution of cultural forms that were becoming the mainstay of anthropologists. ‘More discrimination’, she wrote, ‘is needed, more close examination of definite areas, more study of variations, and more enquiry into causes’.⁹⁵ And, as she explained the following year, the need for ‘close examination of definite areas’ was justified both on the grounds that ‘belief, custom,

⁹² Charlotte S. Burne, ‘Review of *Sociological Papers: 1904*’, *Folklore*, 16/1 (1905), p. 120.

⁹³ Burne, ‘The value of European folklore’, pp. 40–1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

and myth' form part of an 'interdependent, homogeneous' local 'unity', as well as on the grounds that folklore, even in 1911, was a 'living and influential [...] part of the native home-grown culture of the people'.⁹⁶

Almost as if a direct response to Burne's encouragements, the following issue of *Folklore* published an article by D. H. Moutray Read on 'Hampshire folklore'. Much in the mould of an earlier article by Mabel Peacock on the 'folklore of Lincolnshire', the author was keen to stress the essentially *unromantic* qualities of the county, especially in relation to the better-studied Celtic regions.⁹⁷ There was in all probability, Moutray Read wrote, little in folkloric terms that was 'peculiar to the county', a fact that derived from Hampshire's supposed centrality to the south-eastern engine-room of national history.⁹⁸ Many of the items she had uncovered there could, she said, likely be found elsewhere. And yet, even as the solidity of her field site constantly threatened to disintegrate into national or even global interconnectedness, Moutray-Reid also made a determined effort to preserve the significance of the local in a form that flowed directly from her own, native knowledge of the county.⁹⁹ Hence, while she suggested that her findings would make interesting reading for a 'comparative folklorist', she in almost the same breath announced that she was only able to discern this point because of her ability to pierce through the 'notoriously uncommunicative' character of the 'Hampshire folk' – the point being, presumably, that despite all the points of comparison, Hampshire folk still possessed their own character.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, she also spent much time reflecting on the way that what lore there was to be found in Hampshire owed to its unique variation in topographical conditions, whereby open lines of communication to the rest of the world could be found in

⁹⁶ Burne, 'Essential unity of folklore', pp. 22, 26.

⁹⁷ Mabel Peacock, 'The folklore of Lincolnshire', *Folklore*, 12/2 (1901), pp. 161–80.

⁹⁸ D. H. Moutray Read, 'Hampshire folklore', *Folklore*, 22/2 (1911), pp. 292–329, at p. 293.

⁹⁹ She made similar claims in her *Highways and Byways in Hampshire* (London, 1908).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

some parts of the county, isolated enclaves in others.¹⁰¹ ‘Hampshire’, in this formulation, was something of a leaky object, a *somewhere* that contained parts of *everywhere*. But as Moutray-Read appeared to suggest, and as I think Burne would also have had it, it was precisely this tense combination of integrity and perviousness that made it an object worth studying.

Moutray-Read’s article was one of many Edwardian folkloristic publications, many of them by women, to take up the theme of local specificity. Mabel Peacock’s work on Lincolnshire was later expanded into a *County folk-lore* volume for the FLS, and was joined by volumes on Herefordshire, Yorkshire and Dorset by Ella Mary Leather, Eliza Gutch, and John Symonds Udal respectively.¹⁰² In 1905, Margaret Eyre wrote about the Wye Valley for *Folklore*, arguing that the region possessed a remarkable homogeneity of belief and custom despite the mix of ‘Dean people’, ‘Welsh’ and ‘Silurian’ ethnic ‘types’ living there.¹⁰³ Rather than being the possession of any one ‘race’, the region’s present distinctive characteristics could only be discerned by viewing it as a unique complex of intermixing histories. Another author on Cotswold lore argued that the ‘exclusiveness of the people’ owed mainly to physical geography.¹⁰⁴ All these authors defended the authenticity of their material and the legitimacy of their conclusions on the grounds that, via intensive fieldwork and local residence, they possessed in-depth, native knowledge of the regions they studied.¹⁰⁵ And yet, all the authors also dwelt heavily on the connections of their local material to other parts of Britain and abroad, knowledge they had gained from their own connections to the metropolitan world of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁰² Ella Mary Leather, *The Folk-Lore of Herefordshire, Collected from Oral and Printed Sources* (Hereford, 1912); Eliza Gutch (ed.), *County Folk-Lore. Printed Extracts no. 8, East Riding of Yorkshire* (London, 1912), p. 7; John Symonds Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-Lore*, (Hertford, 1922).

¹⁰³ Margaret Eyre, ‘Folk-lore of the Wye Valley’, *Folklore*, 16/2 (1905), pp. 162–79, at p. 163.

¹⁰⁴ J. B. Partridge, ‘Cotswold place-lore and customs’, *Folklore*, 23/3 (1912), pp. 332–42.

¹⁰⁵ E. g. Peacock, ‘The Folklore of Lincolnshire’, p. 161; Eyre, ‘Folk-Lore of the Wye Valley’, p. 163; a number of other authors also displayed the tendency to self-authorise on the grounds of local residence. See, e. g. W. Wollaston Groome, ‘Suffolk leechcraft’, *Folklore*, 6/2 (1895), pp. 117–29; Alex M. McAlldowie, ‘Personal experiences in witchcraft’, *Folklore*, 7/3 (1896), pp. 309–14.

scholarship. As these folklorists made their field sites into places that possessed both local coherence and global diffusivity, that were both native *and* cosmopolitan, they also, perhaps, made them into reflections of themselves.

Conclusion

Over the second half of the nineteenth century, the practice of folkloristics underwent several transformations. What began as a form of networked research in the 1850s age of mass print was quickly superseded by an anthropological project that sought to fold folkloric material into its totalizing investigations into the origins and development of civilization. Both iterations, however, relied on a form of collecting practice that relied mostly on ‘scraps’ and ‘gleanings’. The real innovation came in the final decades of the century, when antiquarian and natural history societies began to find the kinds of studies they had long been making being recruited for a new push towards ‘scientific’ fieldwork. The collectors who responded to this call increasingly began to reflect on the possibilities and limits of such ‘intensive’ study at the local level. The form of research they came to value appeared eerily similar to what would later be called participant observation, a practice that put weight on both emotional and technical skills in its quest to access and translate the deep cavities of intersubjective experience. It was out of such a practice that it became possible, however ambiguously, to imagine Britain as a place of overlapping and porous, yet internally coherent, local social systems, whose distinctive features could best be revealed from the inside.

Of course, this was never an entirely complete revolution. Whether through genuine commitment or through deference to the scholarly conventions of the time, much of what figures like Charlotte Burne published did still couch itself in the language of ‘survivals’ and

acknowledge its indebtedness to social-evolutionist theories.¹⁰⁶ Yet the very fact of placing so much emphasis on first-hand, localized study did lead to the opening of new avenues for thinking about folklore's object of study. It is instructive in this sense to compare the story of folkloristics to the better-known story of anthropological research taking place beyond Britain's borders. In most accounts of anthropology's history, it was, likewise, the development of intensive fieldwork in exactly this same period that delivered the final blow to social-evolutionism and precipitated the rise of cultural relativism.¹⁰⁷ The holistic study of places as diverse as the Pacific, east Africa, and the Americas, with all the insights about the internal consistency and incommensurability of the world's 'cultures' it generated, came to destroy the possibility of a holistic reconstruction of the entire history of civilization.¹⁰⁸ By the Edwardian period, this too was an incomplete revolution, with diffusionist, Darwinian and Boasian perspectives all jostling for attention before settling into the functionalisms and structuralisms of the interwar years. But it was nonetheless through the emphasis on close observation of cultural difference, the argument goes, that Britons came eventually to be disabused of their sense of standing at the apex of global history, instead finally learning that they were simply one possible culture among many.

By placing folkloristics back into this story, we can see that these same sorts of ideas were being generated in Britain and among its various 'cultures' as much as they were elsewhere. One clear reason that historians have missed this point owes much to the divergent fortunes of folklore studies and anthropology through the twentieth century: the more marginal the former became, the harder it has become to imagine it ever had anything of value to

¹⁰⁶ The term crops up multiple times throughout Burne's edition *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1914).

¹⁰⁷ Henrika Kuklick, 'Personal equations'; George W. Stocking, 'The Ethnographer's magic: fieldwork in British Anthropology from Tylor to Malinowski', in George W. Stocking (ed.), *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, (Madison, 1984), pp. 70–120.

¹⁰⁸ Though this kind of holistic reconstruction quickly became the province of archaeology.

contribute. Another reason lies in the still-prevailing tendency to write the history of disciplines via the intellectual projects of its most canonical thinkers. Switching our attention from ‘above’ to ‘below’, and from theory to practice, allows us to grasp not only a richer sense of the ‘communities’ involved in knowledge-making, but also the crucial intellectual contributions they made.