

The work of the School of
SCOTTISH STUDIES

Stewart F. Sanderson *

AIMS AND OBJECTS

A history of the foundation of the School of Scottish Studies would find its source-material in a strange medley of memoranda, private letters from one professor to another, half-remembered scraps of common-room talk, and a certain amount of retrospective divination. The motifs have not all been documented, although together they form the basis of the plans described by the Convener in the foreword to this journal.

Among the many considerations in the minds of the founders of the School was the desirability of making the fullest use of the material already being collected by the newly-formed Linguistic Survey, material of potential value to many fields of study besides pure linguistics. Indeed, some of this richly varied material was not likely to develop its full value even for dialectologists unless parallel studies were instituted to supplement and amplify the linguistic work. For instance, a collection of local names for a particular object could only prove fully significant if a study were made of possible variations in the construction or use of the object. Even the various functional contexts in which the object was found might influence the choice of word to be used. Since the University of Edinburgh had already started its Linguistic Survey, and the four Scottish Universities together were to assume responsibility for the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue and the Scottish National Dictionary, it seemed a great opportunity to lay the foundations of future collaboration for the common benefit of all these activities. The fruitful results of the *Wörter und Sachen* approach were clearly visible in the achievement of scholars in other countries. There was therefore a general feeling that the School should pay particular attention to such activities as the collection of popular traditions, where the decay factor made an early start imperative if the older material was to be saved.

* Secretary-Archivist, School of Scottish Studies.

In 1952 the Committee of the School received a grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Scottish Universities in addition to an allocation from the general University budget for the quinquennial period then beginning; and work was started on the collection of oral tradition (folk-tales, items of belief and custom, et cetera), folk-song and music, the study of material culture, the study of the social structure of rural communities, place-names, and—a little apart from the other subjects—the sponsorship of a complete illustrated corpus of the pre-historic material remains in Scotland. It has been the aim of the Committee to keep the structure of the School flexible in these first experimental years, and of course modifications may be made from time to time to the present rather broadly-based programme.

SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

The Study of Place-names: This is essentially a study in both time and place: history and geography meet and marry here. The searching of historical documents reveals the changing forms of a name across the centuries, with all that that implies for linguistic history: geography, on the other hand, casts light on the origin and meaning of the name or of its elements. It is essential to collect all the forms from the earliest spellings to the present-day pronunciation, for without such documentation, from sources such as early records, charters, feu-titles and maps, as well as from the lips of living men, nothing really definite can be determined. It is a fantastically complicated task to identify the linguistic stock and the meaning of the elements of our place-names. Successive waves of invaders (Picts, Britons, Gaels, Norsemen, Angles, Normans and others) have at various periods passed across or settled in our country, adopting and handing on versions of each others' names for places: and to come to the modern name, as printed on the Ordnance Survey map, equipped only with a smattering of Gaelic, a bundle of Norse roots, and a simple faith in certainties, is worse than useless. The origins of place-names may sometimes be settled only by comparing the geographic occurrence of names in different parts of the country: and these basic needs of *full documentation, historical and geographical comparison*, are fundamental not only to place-names studies but to all kinds of folkloristic research. Another task of importance is the recording of names which have never been written down. The names of

fields, clumps of trees, burns and pools, rocks, beaches, and creeks are often unrecorded, but they might illuminate many problems otherwise difficult to solve. A correspondent from the Long Island has sent in over a thousand such names (some of them with traditional explanations of their meaning) from his home parish, each name pinpointed on a map supplied by the School. If people would do the same for the 855 other parishes of Scotland they would make a very real contribution to the study of Scottish history.

The Work in Social Anthropology: There are obviously relevant correspondences between this discipline and the discipline of material culture and folklore. Social anthropology studies the lives and organisation of the people whose traditions, spiritual and material, are the field of investigation of the folklorist. The results of this sociological analysis will show the folklorist why certain kinds of traditions are changing their forms: at the same time, folkloristic studies can explain certain social phenomena (e.g. the division of labour between men and women, or the social distinctions and rules at a *ceilidh*) in terms of tradition, and thus give historical perspective to the functional analysis conducted by the social anthropologist. The School has so far made a detailed study of a Hebridean community from the points of view of social and economic relationships, kinship ties, social mobility and social change, together with a shorter study designed to elicit comparative material from an adjacent Hebridean community with a different religious background and economic pattern. An investigation of tinker groups is also in progress.

Folk Culture: One of the chief activities of the School of Scottish Studies has been and is the study of folk culture. The student of folk culture may deal with so many kinds of material, and may handle his material in so many ways, that it seems almost as impossible to define the scope of folklore studies to everyone's satisfaction as it is to agree on an internationally acceptable terminology—witness the deliberations of the International Folklore Congress at Arnheim in 1955, when even that highly authoritative body of scholars found itself in difficulties with European ethnology, ethnography, folklore, *Volkskunde* and *traditions populaires*. The folklore studies pursued by the School might be said to be “the recording and investigation of the oral and material traditions of rural communities in Scotland, with special emphasis on the traditions of the pre-industrial age”.

The study of folklore is, in fact, the study of a certain kind of history; the intimate domestic history of a people. History is not just a matter of kings and queens, battles and treaties, statesmen and parliaments: these are certainly important, moving as they do in splendid and colourful succession into the highlights of time; but they play their part against a more enduring background. Behind them and around them lies the less spectacular but more lasting history of a people's beliefs and customs, notions of right and wrong, good and evil, luck and ill-luck, happiness and sorrow, songs and stories, facts and fancies—all the common places which make up the intricately-patterned fabric of our environment. It is this kind of history with which the student of folklore is concerned.

The study of folklore is an international science: yet within the framework of western European civilisation there are minor differences from country to country, province to province, parish to parish; and it is precisely in these variations of the larger patterns of culture that the folklorist starts his work. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote that no matter how you educate a Scotsman, no matter whether he is brought up to speak the dialect of his native parish or the mandarin English which our grandfathers went to such trouble and expense to import into the Northern Kingdom, he will still speak with a "Scots accent of mind": and it is those who speak with a Scots accent of mind that most immediately concern us. The study of folklore begins with the individual and his local and personal heritage of tradition.

Every age, of course, has its folklore: it is axiomatic that the "folk" are not simple-minded rustics in Caithness or Kintyre, living in a cloud of by-gones and survivals. The most sophisticated urban dwellers have their horoscope columns, step off the pavement when they come to a ladder, and believe in the magical power of chlorophyll tablets over halitosis. There will always be material for the folklorist to collect, but if we are to track down the last vestiges of pre-industrial tradition, both spiritual and material, we shall have to move very fast in this age of mass-communication with its London-centred press, radio and now television, its Hollywood films and party-line philosophies, which are so rapidly and radically stereotyping the patterns of popular culture. What matters now is the collection of evidence. The analysis can wait for the moment.

What sorts of things, then, are being collected?

Folklore: Of first importance is the *oral tradition* of the Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland—a part of the world of importance quite out of proportion to the number of its inhabitants. For here we have an ancient culture comparatively unmodified by the influence of twentieth-century “civilisation”: a culture containing many strange blends of things from the past. The oral traditions of this culture are preserved in an ancient language, and although that language is dying under the force and pressure of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are still men whose skill in the tongue, and whose respect for tradition, have preserved for us some of the oldest folk-tale material in Europe. In this oral field the School has a small but strong team headed by a collector with a remarkable range of experience and interests. In support there are collectors for Gaelic folk-song and for Scots folk-song (both concerned more particularly with song texts), and also a musician, again a man of wide experience extending over many years of folk-song collection and research. The range and quality of Hebridean tradition-bearers seems to be equalled in the art of Shetland story-tellers as judged by work on the folk-tale tradition outside the Gaelic-speaking area. Folk-tales have also been recorded in Scots from tinker story-tellers, and, despite the common remark that the folk-tale disappeared from the Borders with Sir Walter Scott, from one exponent not twenty miles from the Shirra’s own home.

Another valuable aspect of the oral field is local historical tradition: reminiscences of things that happened in the district in times past, of feuds and disputes, incidents in the droving days, great disasters when the crops failed or the herring left the loch, ancient customs or ceremonies no longer in use, noted local characters and their doings—all the old things that have never found their way into the books, but are preserved and cherished in anecdote.

Folk Music: The collection of *folk-song* is another important aspect of the School’s activities. About 5000 Gaelic songs, including variants, have been recorded; and about 3000 ballads, bothy-songs, and children’s songs in Scots—the largest corpus since Gavin Greig collected the magnificent body of ballads lying in MS. notebooks in the library of Aberdeen University. But there is something new in the resources of the present-day collector and the possible scope of his studies, for the recording-machine can give us the very tones and accents of the singer. For the first time it is possible to analyse not only words and

melodies, but also styles of singing and intonation. It has been possible to note that singers in certain islands prefer to pitch their songs in a lower compass than in other islands; to observe the much richer and freer ornamentation of Lewis singers over Skye singers; to differentiate between those who sing on the true Hebridean scales and those whose ears have become attuned to the equally-tempered scale of the B.B.C. concert-room or the school piano. Pipe-music, fiddle-playing, mouth-music, a superb recording of reels and strathspeys played on the Jew's harp by a man using the bagpipe intervals—these are some of the miscellaneous items in the School's collection, which includes recordings given us by Dr. John Lorne Campbell who, with Mrs. Campbell, has done so much for one area of Scottish folklore studies.

Folk-song collection has a double importance. There is the musical value, and also the historical.

Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?

In the texts of folk-song there lie embedded a wealth of historical information: the disposition of the forces and the manner of the engagement at Inverlochy; references to ancient sports and pastimes, archery, hunting and the chase; entertainments; dress; even hair styles—matters of great importance for the social historian.

Work in Material Culture: In addition to the oral aspects of tradition are material traditions too. The landscape of the Merse strikes the eye immediately as being different from the landscape of the Spey Valley: the building materials and layout of the houses, the angles of the roofs, the ways of tying the thatch, the types of fencing used, all help to build up a picture of the variations of tradition within the country. The Hebridean black house, its massive walls rounded against the western wind, its roof of thatch pegged or tied over a construction of stunted timber or driftwood, the reek from its central fire of peats finding its lazy way through a smoke-hole in the thatch, reflects a different way of life from that of the East Lothian or Fife Coast fisherman, whose gabled chimneys burn sea-coal, whose walls glisten with tar from his boat, and whose roof is made of curved pantiles of a cheerful red clay.

Climate, local resources of material, the day's toil and what it requires in the way of working spaces and implements, mark off the different culture areas; and an investigation of the house, its furnishings and gear, their construction, use and function, is a necessary complement to the investigation of oral tradition.

Unfortunately, such studies have been very much neglected by previous generations of students, with of course the outstanding exception of Dr. I. F. Grant and her Museum of Highland Life. (My own belief is that our studies of the material traditions are in need of considerable expansion: but then, so is almost anything we do. We could use three times the staff and four times the available finance without feeling that we were other than a small institute making our way up a steep hill very late in the day.)

Late in the day: when one remembers that the Swedish folk-museum movement has been going on for more than half a century, it is strange that so little was done in Scotland to follow up the studies of the black house made by Captain Thomas in the 1850's and '60s, or to pursue the fascinating byroads along which Arthur Mitchell led his audience when he gave the Rhind Lectures in 1876, printed later in his book *The Past in the Present*. Material culture studies in this country have been largely confined to pre-historic studies. The archaeologist has investigated the material aspects of life in the Stone or Iron Ages—housing, food, tools and weapons: yet the stone huts dug out of the sand-dunes round our coasts are intrinsically no more important than the stone houses found in the Hebrides to-day. The concept of pre-history is sometimes misleading. History is a continuum, and in remote rural areas some things (fishing and agricultural practices, building and wool-working techniques, proverbs perhaps and attitudes of mind) have not changed very much at all in the last thousand or two years.

EQUIPMENT AND SERVICES

It will be obvious that extensive cataloguing, archiving and technical services are necessary for handling the fruits of field-work—the collections of sound recordings, photographs of objects, survey drawings of traditional house-types and so forth. *Technical Aids:* At 27-28 George Square there is a studio equipped for both audition and high fidelity recording. Field recordings are made on magnetic tape, the cheapest and most

portable system. The machines capable of making high quality recordings are not, unfortunately, of any use in areas where there is no electric power supply: so in addition to the large machines are smaller tape recorders operated by accumulator or dry battery packs. The more expensive of these machines, where not only the recording mechanisms but also the motors for driving the tape are electrically powered, give a fairly high level of quality: but the older machines, where the tape is driven by a clockwork motor, are of little use for music or song, though adequate for speech. Magnetic tape is not a stable form of recording, and already a deterioration in the quality of the earliest tapes has been noted. It is proposed, therefore, to store the most valuable material on gramophone disks, and the laboratory contains equipment for dubbing from tape to tape, tape to disk, disk to tape, or disk to disk. Special machines are also in use when transcribing tape or disk recordings.

There is also a darkroom for photographic work, the object being to create a kind of folk-museum on paper. The preparation of finished drawings of village and house sites, house-types, details of construction, field patterns and so forth, requires the services of a draughtsman-illustrator, and a recent start on this work too has been made.

Research Facilities: The School contains small study-rooms for the staff; a growing library with important collections of foreign books (especially Scandinavian), useful not only for comparative study, but also for methodology; a conference room for committee and seminar work; and of course the archives. These contain reels of recording tape and disks in a constant-temperature room; files of photographs, plans and maps; and shelves of transcriptions and notebooks. One of the greatest problems is to convert the material on the recording tapes to written transcriptions. There already exist more than six hundred hours of solid recording. As it may take anything from four to eight hours to transcribe one hour's recording much yet remains to be done to make findings readily available. Still, the material is there, safe for the moment; and one gains a little, albeit cold, comfort from the fact that the Director of the Dialect and Folklore Institute in Uppsala estimated in 1952 that he would need ten people for ten years to overtake the untranscribed recordings in his Institute! At any rate, the material is temporarily preserved: as safe as the ten thousand MS. pages of Scottish Gaelic material collected in the Hebrides

by the Irish Folklore Commission, who so generously deposited a microfilm copy in the library of the School when it was set up.

The written transcriptions have to be catalogued and indexed. This is not the place to go into the ways in which folk-tales and their motifs are classified by a kind of literary botany: that is a task for the expert; but suffice it to say that an analytical index of all our MS. material has been started on the lines of the Swedish system which may be best known in Great Britain in its Irish variant, in Sean O'Sullivan's *Handbook of Irish Folklore*. This detailed subject-index, which covers every aspect of human life and thought, should of course incorporate material from at least the main historical MSS. and printed sources: again, there is a crying need for readers and excerpters.

It will be many years till the material can be analysed with confidence. Some of the folk-tale and folk-song material could of course be handled usefully in certain ways in the fairly near future: but the items of general folklore, if they are to be regarded as elements in a living culture, not as mere assemblages of curious but useless facts, cannot possibly be handled until very much more material is collected—until, to put it succinctly, enough of the total culture has been recorded to provide the context in which these elements are to be considered.

A BROADER BASIS OF WORK

In order to supplement the field collection carried out by the staff of the School, it is hoped to secure the co-operation of interested institutions and individuals wherever they occur. There are already some people recording the traditions of their home districts in notebooks provided by the School: and one of these—one only, and his efforts would be outstanding in any country—has already written about six thousand pages in three years. Much more help of this kind is needed. A questionnaire has been devised on certain aspects of Scottish life and traditions for use in schools, youth clubs, adult education groups and so forth: and this is now beginning to be used by a network of correspondents. From it we hope to get a general overall picture of certain phenomena, and also to get in touch with a still wider circle of people who will co-operate in the most rewarding kind of questionnaire work; namely,

the detailed questionnaire, dealing with one specific topic, and answerable in a dozen words or so. The framing of such a questionnaire is a difficult technical task, but the advice of scholars abroad who have experience of the problems involved has been obtained. When answers to such questionnaires are received from correspondents all over the country, it will be possible to start on the distribution maps which should not only help us systematically to define various culture patterns in Scotland, but also, in collaboration with our Irish, Scandinavian and other neighbours, to study the culture contacts and loans in and around the North Sea area and north-west Europe. This could be the basis of a contribution to the much-desired atlas of European folk culture—a contribution which would depend not only on the work of a handful of scholars, but on the generous co-operation and self-expression of many Scotsmen and women, the inheritors of the richly coloured tapestry of Scotland's past.

Not only the heirs of the past, but the trustees of the future. Although, according to some, it is not the academic folklorist's business to meddle with the future traditions of the country, one cannot help speculating on the various ways in which this vast encyclopædia of Scottish tradition may be consulted. The study of traditional house-types, though in itself a purely academic research project, may one day help Local Authorities to build new houses which grow the more naturally out of the landscape because they not only use local materials, but provide kinds of living space that people instinctively want. The analysis of the structure of traditional communities may suggest better ways of giving stability to new planned communities. Some Scottish Dvorak may one day draw inspiration for a symphony from the songs of Shetland or the Hebrides, from the bare tragic fall of a ballad line, from the fantastic syncopation of mouth music that sets the whole body jigging and dancing, from the charming lullabies and poignant love-songs that have flowered so spontaneously on our Scottish soil. The possibilities are endless: the task ahead is immense.

Concrete results cannot be expected for many years, and the University has, from an academic point of view, made a bold investment in an uncertain future. But if the investment is bold, the faith is strong: faith in the tradition-bearers who have preserved these things for generations, and who are now so generously reposing their inheritance in what should become a most remarkable national archive; faith too that people

will come forward in sufficient numbers to help this immense task to be achieved.

Tempus edax rerum: the tooth of time has made savage attacks on the old Scotland, and it is strange to think of teddy boys in the douce streets of Edinburgh. But a new Scotland is being shaped, with new industries, hydro-electric schemes, forestry and agriculture. The stronger the spiritual roots of that Scotland, the more splendidly will she flourish. There is work for all in the task of preserving and bequeathing our national heritage.