Scottish Ethnology: Crossing the Rubicon

Inaugural Lecture for the

Chair of Scottish Ethnology

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When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he took a decisive step that led to war. War is not in question with Scottish ethnology, but at least the University of Edinburgh, in setting up a Chair of Scottish Ethnology as the first such Chair in Britain, took a decisive and pioneering step. This enterprising move has brought Scotland into line with nearly every other country in Europe.

It is a privilege to be the holder of this Chair, but it is important at this time to remember what lies behind it. It is not so many years ago that the word 'ethnology' would hardly have been understood in academic contexts in this country, at least not as it had come to be understood in the surrounding countries of Europe. The basis for the new situation has been laid by work from two overlapping directions, both of them stemming from the 1950s.

The first was the founding of the School of Scottish Studies in 1951. The School's tremendous work in the collection of oral traditions and the building up of the Sound and Photographic Archives was complemented from the 1970s by postgraduate teaching and then by undergraduate teaching. Now it is possible to take a single Honours four-year degree in Scottish Ethnology, and the School also has a good number of outstanding postgraduate students. There is no doubt that this academic activity played a major role in the University of Edinburgh's decision to establish the Chair of Scottish Ethnology within the School of Scottish Studies, which is a full department within the Faculty of Arts, as well as continuing its role as the centre for the national Sound Archive.

The second was the setting up in 1959 of the Country Life Section of the former National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Through its subsequent series of exhibitions on major topics of Scottish rural life, its eventual founding of the Scottish Agricultural Museum, its establishment of the Scottish Country Life Archive (now the Scottish Ethnological Archive), and its series of publications, it became a focal point for material culture studies, thus complementing in a great degree the work of the School of Scottish Studies. After the Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland amalgamated in 1985, the Country Life Section became the Working Life Section, and its remit was broadened to

encompass urban and industrial as well as rural conditions of life.

These two centres of activity have done a great deal to raise the level of understanding of what 'ethnology' means, in European terms, within Britain, and in this inaugural lecture I shall look at the provision of ethnological 'centres' in Europe, outline the phases of development of this complex discipline, and look a little to the future. A survey published in 1967 showed that there were then in Europe 65 university chairs dealing with ethnology, as well as 13 related institutes. Germany, with 13 chairs in the West and two in the East, was far and away in the lead. Poland came next with seven, then Hungary and Switzerland with four each. (E.E. 1.4 (1967), Introduction).

The survey revealed the great depth of ethnological teaching in Germany and elsewhere in Middle Europe. From a British viewpoint, this was perhaps unexpected. We are accustomed to looking to Scandinavian countries for a lead in ethnology and have benefited greatly from contact with them. The Archives of the School of Scottish Studies owe much in their form to those of the Archive for Dialect and Folk Traditions in Uppsala, as also do those of the Department of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin. Our open-air and folk museums, whether national like the Welsh Folk Museum or serving more local needs like the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie or the Glenesk Museum in Angus, also owe much to the earlier developments in Scandinavian countries. In both the theory and the practice of ethnology, Scandinavian ethnologists continue to be in the van. Like all good scholars they are quick to grasp or test ideas and theories emanating from neighbouring disciplines, for ethnology is above all a method of approach to the study of the cultural history of mankind and is prepared to make progress by all possible means. But the Scandinavians do not stand alone. We ignore Middle Europe now at our peril. Unfortunately the German scholars are less kind to us than the Scandinavians, who have always used a good deal of English in their academic work. An immense depth of solid and pioneering research work in ethnology exists in Germany. Any growing generation of ethnologists in this country must get to grips with German in order to be able to keep up properly with current theory and practice. Linguistic isolation may still be a British characteristic, though no doubt the pace of events in the Europe of today will—given time—lead to a cure.

Where exactly do we stand in these islands? We now have a Chair in Scottish Ethnology, based on and in the School of Scottish Studies. The only direct equivalent is the Chair of Irish Folklore, held by Professor Bo Almqvist at University College, Dublin. England trails behind though all honour is due to the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language in Sheffield, led by Professor John Widdowson. For a time there was also the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies at Leeds University, founded in 1960 as part of the English Department. Its Director was the School's former secretary and archivist, Stewart Sanderson. But in 1984 the Institute fell victim to the first round of the major reorganisation of the British

university system, which in translation means government cuts—surely a concrete example of the negative impact of politics on the study of our cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, the Institute's organisational models were the School of Scottish Studies, the Department of Irish Folklore in Dublin and the Institute of Dialect and Folk Traditions in Uppsala (for some of the background see Lysaght 1990, 27-51; Lysaght 1993, 49-61; Sanderson 1991, 5-18).

The academic name of the subject was long a matter of debate. Names *are* important, as Professor Anthony Cohen, Department of Social Anthropology, made clear in his inaugural lecture on Rites and Identity, Rights of the Self on 22 November 1990. He spoke of names, naming and associated rituals in relation to the concepts of selfness and socialness, and the meaning of having a 'right to be oneself'. Translating this to the level of academic disciplines, I believe that ethnology has now gained the right to be itself, and in this the name itself plays a role. Efforts to find a generally accepted name and thereby an accepted identity have been part of the growth of the subject. But when the Institute in Leeds was being set up, Sanderson said of it: 'We felt we couldn't use the word *ethnology* in English studies, as we probably wouldn't have got that through the Senate and other committees' (J.F.I. VII, 2/3 (1970), 104).

If this was true of academic Britain in the 1960s, what of other parts of Europe? There was a multiplicity of names: the Scandinavian *folkliv* and its English parallel *folk life*, Germanic *Volkskunde*, the term *folklore* itself, the Greek-based *laography* and others. These were seen as concealing (as language differences helped to do also) what was recognised to be a substantive discipline of general validity. Scandinavian and Finnish scholars were amongst the first to grasp the nettle. At a joint meeting at Jyväskylää in Finland in 1969, it was agreed that 'etnologi' should replace 'folkliv' as the official academic term for the subject. Following this initiative, and influenced by it, German scholars undertook a plebiscite on the name, under the aegis of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, in 1970. The conclusion was: 'The term "European Ethnology" appears to have a real chance of coming into common general use. It would be a great benefit in encouraging the better integration of national and regional "ethnologies", in stimulating associated comparative studies, in deepening the discussion on the theoretical side, and in defining the character and function of the subject. The great majority of the scholars and institutions that were consulted favoured the adoption of "European Ethnology", if not outright, at least as a by-name—for example, in German, "Volkskunde (europäische Ethnologie)". This is a compromise that preserves the "Volkskunde" tradition, and at the same time emphasises the international aspect of the subject. The widespread demand for an international term can now be realised' (Wiegelmann 1971).

There is still an aftermath of older terms in European countries, but the hoovering up of other terms by 'ethnology' has proceeded rapidly. Even in the USSR, the Ethnographical Institute in Moscow has just become the Institute of

Ethnology and Anthropology, and its journal, long edited by my old friend Kyril Čistov in Leningrad as *Sovietskaya Etnografia*, has become *Sovietskaya Etnologiya ii Antropologiya*. There is now an accepted general international name for the discipline. The cluster of older terms is becoming no more than a marker on the path of development. To this extent, in the identification of the 'selfness' of ethnology as a generally recognised discipline, the Rubicon has been crossed.

But not all the troops have crossed the bridgehead yet, and here I want to touch on a subject that could be as controversial as monetary union in Europe. What are we to do with folklore and all that it involves? Though enshrined in the title of the august Folklore Society, founded in London in 1878, it has never achieved full academic recognition, in spite of all the work and efforts of British folklorists (usefully summed up in Dorson 1968 (a) and 1968 (b)). Anthropology, for instance, did not open its doors to folklore, even though Sir Edward B. Tylor, first Professor of Anthropology in Oxford, was active at the same time as the Folklore Society was making its presence felt.

Striving for greater academic acknowledgement remains. An editor of a new journal, *Rural History: Economy, Society and Culture*, observed in 1989 that: 'for long the concerns of rural historians and folklorists have been separated, as if the study of virtually all aspects of folklore (particularly, for some reason, that of England) was considered something less than respectable . . . despite the fact that very original research has often been done by scholars with the expertise and breadth to incorporate folklore study into a wider disciplinary framework' (Snell 1989, 218).

Similarly, Professor John Widdowson, Sheffield, deplored the fact in 1990 that England had no major academic or public institution to 'function, amongst other things, as an official forum for fostering a sense of regional identity and a proper pride in community and in maintenance of tradition', though Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were better off (Widdowson 1990, 209). These are comments from a rural historian and a linguist. They demonstrate continuing unease, at least in England.

I should here clarify my own position, and in doing so may touch on the beginnings of a solution. As I see it, folklore is part of the wider field of ethnology as the term is now construed by agreement between European scholars. It is normal for any discipline to have branches within it, sometimes even substantial ones. Those who concentrate their work in such branches may well feel that they are concerned with the whole tree, whether they are or not. Of course there are differences in emphases between the study of spiritual or oral, and the material aspects of culture, but as often as not, these amount to technicalities. Put in an over-simplified way, you need a tape-recorder for one and a measuring tape for the other.

But objects can also be made to speak in their own way, like oral traditions. They have regional characteristics and individual properties due in part to techniques of

use and resultant wear. They are themselves symbols that can be subjected to analysis. This need not be very different from that applied to songs, tales, proverbs, all the audible symbols of humankind. They can be used to interpret and re-interpret this history of cultural areas and of interactions between areas, as they are and as they have been changing through time in a continuous kaleidoscopic process. This is why I shall be doing my best to ensure that students in the School of Scottish Studies—on whom the future practice and development of the subject in Scotland depends—are given every opportunity to realise that major branches like folklore and material culture are not separable from the greater tree of ethnology, which is itself a part of the limitless forest of the cultural history of mankind.

The title I have chosen for my lecture is influenced by the inaugural lecture of my Danish equivalent in the University of Copenhagen, Professor Bjarne Stoklund. His title was 'European Ethnology between Scylla and Charybdis' (Stoklund 1971 and 1972). The Chair he took over, by the way, was founded in 1959 as the Chair in Material Folk Culture, but, soon after Stoklund took over from Professor Axel Steensberg in 1970, the name was changed to the Chair in European Ethnology. Nevertheless the Institute associated with the Chair has retained its older name: Institut for europæisk folkelivsforskning (Institute for European Folk Life Research).

Stoklund's inaugural lecture presented ethnology as a growing organism, still finding its feet in the world and surrounded by dangers. One of these, the Scylla of his title, was the danger of too-ready specialisation, or of too great concentration on narrow aspects, with research links only or mainly with like-minded colleagues at home and abroad practising similar methods of approach in the same or in related disciplines (Fenton 1985, 51). I do not think this is a real danger. It is, of course, entirely natural for scholars to get together to discuss their subjects, to exchange ideas, offprints and books, and generally to behave as active exponents of the subject they profess.

What was really troubling Stoklund was the way in which ethnology had hitherto developed, or had been practised, with strong emphases on the material and largely pre-industrial aspects of rural society. Rural society, it had been thought, was where the tradition bearers were to be found, where traces of the past in the present remained. Here survivals could be pin-pointed and used as indicators of western man's ascent from a more primitive to a more civilised status. Stoklund, as an ethnologist conscious of changing times, was deeply influenced in what he said by the need to take into account new circumstances. New methods of approach had to be found, more appropriate to an increasingly industrialised and urbanised society. There was also a need to adopt more theoretical approaches, though without being overwhelmed by the dangerous allure and generalising tendencies of the social sciences, which Stoklund saw as his Charybdis.

To put what he said into perspective for Britain—of which Scotland is part—we

must look at the background to the development of ethnology. We may begin with eighteenth-century antiquarians, who related the concept of antiquities to 'physical and visual remains and scenes and to the memorials of the great rather than the lowly' (Dorson I (1968 (b)), 1). At the same time, they were also learning to stress the role of tradition, in particular oral tradition. This preserved the superstitious fancies of the common people, 'sharing with material remains the same character of misshapen fragments surviving from a bygone day'. A clergyman like John Brand, who wrote his *Observations on Popular Antiquities* in 1777, might view these with a degree of revulsion as 'pagan-Popish deviltries', though still mindful of Terence's dictum: *Homo* sum, *humani* nihil à me alienum puto (*Ibid*, I, 6, 12). That is a very good motto for an ethnologist.

Let me mention a somewhat unlikely bedfellow, Thomas Carlyle. His knowledge of German literature and thought undoubtedly gives him a claim to be the first systematic British ethnologist, whether he realised it or not. In his only novel, *Sartor Resartus* (1833), he actually developed an approach to a theory of material culture. He described his novel as a 'Satirical Extravaganza on Things in General'. It was allegedly his edited text of a disquisition on clothes by the learned Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, entitled 'Die Kleider ihr Werden und Wirken'. Clothes, whether coverings for the body physical or as enfoldings of the human spirit, are used as a system of symbols to carry Carlyle's thought. He divides the work into two parts, one 'Historical-Descriptive' and the other 'Philosophical-Speculative'. The concept of collection and analysis as a basis for theoretical structure is, of course, not unfamiliar. Carlyle was in no doubt that the two went hand in hand. Theorists may build on theories, but the outcome will be weak if they have not first undergone the harsh discipline of assembling the infinite range of detail of their subject, and letting analysis of that dictate the lines of theory.

Another aspect of Carlyle's remarkable sense of awareness touches on changing fashions of thought, or what our accommodating English language calls Zeitgeist. Homer's Epos remains true, but it is not our Epos, not our truth. Its truth is of a different era. It has to be reinterpreted for succeeding generations (McSweeney and Sabor 1987, 170; Fenton 1990, 178-9). The development of any subject over a long period has to take into account changing fashions in human thought. We may never in reality be able to shake off the accumulated mental detritus of our educational system, or the pervasive influence of upbringing and environment, or the more or less subtle and continuous propaganda from the media. These prevent us from seeing clearly into the minds of people in periods that have passed, though we must always be prepared at least to try. Even if we are going no further back than to the eighteenth century, we can still distinguish three broad phases in the development of ethnology, each conditioned, as it were, by the Zeitgeist.

In summary, the first or antiquarian phase, which saw the coining of the word 'folklore' in 1846 and the foundation of the Folklore Society in London, ran

through the materialism of the Victorian period and into the period between the two world wars. Scots did play a role—for example, Andrew Lang, with books like *Custom and Myth* (1901), and Arthur Mitchell, author of *The Past in the Present: What is Civilisation?* (1880)—but the period is generally marked by thinking that was British or even international in character, often deriving from or related to religious beliefs.

A second, more easily identifiable phase, can be labelled as one of national self-consciousness, with an increasing awareness of core-and-periphery interrelationships. It occupied the middle third of the twentieth century, and is marked by active collecting in the peripheries allied to the appearance of folk and open-air museums, academic institutes and 'folk life' societies, all influenced by Scandinavian models, and all seeking to identify the traditional characteristics of the regions they served.

The third phase covers the last two or three decades and has a very different character. There has been a turning away from rural-based pre-industrial concepts of what was 'traditional'. 'Contemporary documentation' is the buzzword, meaning the recording of and research into the lives and surroundings of working people in industrial and urban environments, often using techniques with which the sociologist will be familiar. The impetus, coming to Britain from Sweden, has gained a foothold in our museums, partly through the activities of the Social History Curators' Group and partly because so many local authority museums have lately been run by Labour-dominated local authorities. To this extent ethnology has developed an element of class-relatedness, which it should observe and analyse, without being swallowed up by it. As a working guide to the historiography of ethnology in Britain, we may sum up the three discernible phases as those of man, nation, class, though this is far too simplistic. Each phase runs into and overlaps with the other; and the model does not take account, as it should, of cross-class phenomena deriving from anxiety for our present-day environment.

Obviously, there is much work to do. The University of Edinburgh has given the opportunity by establishing the Chair of Scottish Ethnology. It is now up to me and my colleagues in the School of Scottish Studies to ensure that we breed a new generation of students able to cope with new approaches as well as understanding and using the old. We have to keep in close touch with international best practice. Ethnology, with its historical approach and its interdisciplinarity, is no easy option. It is a subject of infinite variety, with its own parameters. We are beyond the dangers that Professor Bjarne Stoklund envisaged. There is a vastly increasing demand for its services as new or renewed forms of national heritage are sought in Europe, based on accurately researched and not ideologically manipulated data. Ethnology is developing a sense of social purpose far removed from the romanticism of its formative period. As a subject, it has crossed the Rubicon.

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