

THE VANISHING FOLKLORE OF NOVA SCOTIA

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THE encyclopaedia defines the science of Folklore as a branch of the larger science of Anthropology. This is divided into three distinct parts, (a) Mythology, dealing with the religious phases of man's spiritual development, (b) The Folk Tale, such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Andersen, and (c) Superstitions, riddles, and common "sayings". Curiously enough, this third class—which is by far the least important—appears to be the only form of folklore which is understood as such by many people.

The energy of folklorists on this side of the Atlantic is often devoted to little more than the collection of riddles, rhymes, superstitions and sayings. They neglect the wider and much more interesting field of traditional tales and songs. Many others are inclined to confuse cases of hauntings, second sight, visions and similar phenomena with folklore, in which they have no place at all. But it must be granted that at times the distinction is hard to draw.

Quite the most interesting phase of the subject is the curious way in which traditional tales and stories are reproduced in different corners of the globe, identical in all respects except their local colour, which naturally varies with the manner in which the climate and customs of the various countries differ. For example, the beautiful "Star Boy" legend of the Blackfeet Indians corresponds very closely to several of the Greek and Roman myths. Zoroaster—the founder of the religion of the fire-worshippers of Hindustan—has a remarkable resemblance to the mystic Hiawatha. The Elementals and Nature-spirits, which play so prominent a part in the religious cult known as Theosophy, are easily classed with the Pixies and Brownies of Devonshire, the gnomes and trolls of Scandinavia, the elves and fairies of Central and Southern Europe, and the Bochen of Cape Breton.

In England and other European countries folklore of every sort has been appreciated at its real value for many years past, and the publications of the German Folklore Society—which was founded in 1878—now number over fifty volumes. International Folklore

Congresses were held in Paris, London and Chicago during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the American Folklore Society is at present active in good work. A Canadian branch was formed at Ottawa. The folklore of Ontario and Quebec has been collected and published, with a few additions from British Columbia, but interest in the matter appears to have waned, and the Society itself to have lapsed.

In the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, all of which are extraordinarily rich in such material, practically nothing is being done to conserve this on a systematic basis. If some such effort is not made very soon, a large portion of the data will undoubtedly be lost for ever, as the generation that retains intact the old traditional tales and shanty "come-ye-alls" is dying out under the iron-shod heel of modernity and progress.

The *Fairy Tales* of the Brothers Grimm, a copy of which is among every child's books, are folk tales pure and simple. This collection was the first to be made of such stories recorded exactly as they were related, without alteration, extension, or omission. Similar collections have been put together in the west Highlands of Scotland by the late F. J. Campbell, who took them down in the Gaelic tongue of the narrators, and translated them into English, adhering as closely as possible to the style and form of expression used by the teller of the tale. Many of them are told today in just the same manner in Cape Breton.

Famous writers of modern times, as well as those of the mediæval period, have not disdained to use the folk tale as subject matter upon which to base their poems and stories. The *Arabian Nights Entertainments* are folk tales. So too are Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* and Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Counterparts of this last collection may be found among Celtic traditional tales, while the trolls of Norse legend have their first cousins in the Bochain who lurks amongst the tree-stumps and rocks of Cape Breton.

The Banshee of Celtic lore seems to belong exclusively to the Celtic race. As yet I have discovered no counterpart elsewhere of that mysterious herald of disaster. But mermaids and mermen are as conspicuous in the folklore of the Orkneys and the Shetlands as in the pages of D'Aulnoy and Hans Andersen. These may be safely assumed to constitute a feature of such legend among all peoples who dwell along the seashore. The Lorelei of Germany leads the sailor to his doom in all parts of the world where the waters of the ocean thunder against the rocks of desolate shores and submerged continents. Natural phenomena, indeed, have

given rise to a large number of folk tales and superstitions. Thus the "Feu Follet" and the "Little Blue Fires" of the French Acadians of Nova Scotia are exactly similar to the Jack o' Lantern and the Will o' the Wisp of England, and both refer to the *ignis fatuus* which is a natural feature of all marsh lands.

Witches and witchcraft appear to be similar in characteristics the world over. Faith in the malignant operations of these evilly disposed women exists to-day amongst the descendants of the German settlers in Lunenburg county, as it is firmly rooted amongst the inhabitants of the counties of Antigonish and Cape Breton. A year ago witchcraft was solemnly put forward as a probable solution of a matter which seemed to baffle ordinary methods of enquiry.

I have not as yet discovered any counterpart in Nova Scotian folklore to the Were Wolf of Central Europe, nor are there any tales as yet related to me which at all resemble those of the terrible Yeth Hounds of Dartmoor, whose existence is so firmly maintained by the moor folk of Devonshire. But innumerable tales of hauntings by animals of an "elemental" type, and tales of metempsychosis, are to be collected in many parts of this Province, while people who are supposed to have bartered their souls to the Devil in return for the acquirement of supernatural powers and vision are by no means rare. I have the name and address of such a man, sent to me by one of his relatives, who advised that I should interview him, for he had information I needed. Moreover, the sable gentleman who is in control of the lower regions seems still to walk abroad in this land, and disdains not to assume human form that he may take active part in revels or deals of an unholy nature.

Of all the folk tales and myths which the world can produce, not excepting those of the Greeks, I do not think that for beauty of conception and poetry of expression those of the North American Indians can be surpassed. Those of the Nova Scotia Micmacs are equal to any others as yet collected, and betray a quality of their own in that keen sense of humour so characteristic of the Micmac. Surely no more fascinating personage than the mystic "Glooscap"—the man-god of the Indians of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland—ever trod the earth. The artist able to combine colour effects with descriptive style, and give the world an illustrated narrative of this marvellous creature, will be doing a real service both literary and historical. As yet the legends about the Glooscap are very fragmentary, and a large number of them have never reached the ears of the White man. But almost every county in Nova Scotia has its Indian tales about him, describing how he exercised supernatural powers over everything human or belonging to Nature,

except the Baby, who defeated him completely. For the Baby met all the mighty being's spells with a smile and a crow. In its anglicised form the legend runs thus:

Now to this very day, when'er you see
 A baby well contented, crying "Goo!"
 Or crowing in this style, know that it is
 Because he then remembers in great joy
 How he in strife, all in the olden time,
 Did overcome the Master, conqueror
 Of all the world. For that, of creatures all,
 Or beings which on earth have ever been
 Since the beginning, Baby is alone
 The never yielding and invincible.

"Bochen" haunt swamps and hollows and old bridges. Their hiding places are pointed out to the traveller as "Lag na Bochen", "Drochaid an droch spirit", and so forth. These weird beings are supposed to be unable to cross a running stream, so that the only hope of anyone who is unfortunate enough to find himself accompanied by one (for they have a habit of leaping on the tail of a wagon or behind a horseman and travelling with him) is to reach a fording place in a stream. There the Bochain will at once leave him.

A story is told of such an occurrence taking place near Ghost Lake, New Brunswick. A man was driving in a sleigh one evening along the highway which skirts this region. The place is a swamp around which hang many weird legends and stories, and is supposed to be haunted by "Something" which is neither man nor beast. This Bochain rushed out of the bushes and leaped upon the rear of the sleigh, whereupon the terrified driver scrambled out of the vehicle, and mounted his horse's back, leaving the sleigh to its supernatural passenger. Lashing his horse into a gallop, he kept turning his head to see whether his unwelcome companion was still there. It made no attempt to leave until the team reached a bridge beneath which there was running water, and—as unclean spirits cannot cross such a place—the moment the horse's hoofs struck the bridge the Bochain disappeared.

In the Ohio district of Antigonish county there are living to-day descendants of a man who was known as "Red Duncan McLean." For many years before he died he was reputed to attend meetings of fairies and other supernatural beings. He would sometimes while sitting at home receive a call from them, and no matter how disinclined he might be to answer it—he would be compelled to go. And there is a creature of ill omen known as a "Dreg", amongst

certain people of Gaelic descent. The Dreg can be seen only by those who possess double (that is, second) sight, and its apparition invariably presages a funeral. But the double-sighted person can make the creature perceptible to one of normal vision by merely putting his foot on the other's toe!

There is a curious resemblance between one of Kipling's *Just So Stories*, the Gaelic legend of how the haddock got his stripes, and the Micmac legend as to the manner in which the squirrel acquired his.

The Devil, it seems, was very anxious to catch the haddock, but for a long time the wily fish managed to elude his clutches. At last, however, he was captured. "Ha! Ha! my lad, I have you now", cried the Devil in high glee as he held the haddock close under the gills. But the haddock wriggled and wriggled until the Devil's claws began to slip, and at last he managed to slide out between them. Ever since that day he carries on his body two stripes left by the infernal talons when his ancestor slipped through them.

And, according to the Micmacs, there lived many years ago in the heart of a forest an Indian witch named Gam-ona, whose delight it was to catch wild animals and skin them alive. The skins thus obtained she used to sell as magical preventatives against disease and safeguards against accident. One day she succeeded in catching a squirrel, and was greatly elated by this, for it was a particularly large specimen. She was about to skin him, when—like a flash of lightning—the squirrel slipped through her fingers and escaped. But he kept the marks of her claws on his back to the day of his death, and all his descendants have worn the same stripes.

Another Micmac legend is closely akin to that about Kipling's hero in the *Jungle Books*. It tells how some Indians who lived near a lake went hunting and left the children in the camp alone. One tiny boy crawled away into the bush and got lost. In the early dawn the child thought he saw his mother approaching through the trees. Rushing to her side, he held her in a firm embrace. But it was not his mother. A great she-bear clasped him in her shaggy arms and carried him off to her den, where she warmed and fed him all the winter through, and the search parties who hunted for the missing child gave him up for lost. Later on, he was restored to his people, but for many years he lived as a bear amongst the cubs of his foster mother.

About eight miles from the town of Antigonish there is an old mill standing in a valley which has an evil repute. Its original owner was supposed to have sold his soul to the Devil, and to this

day the valley and the mill are said to be haunted by "Something" which assumes the form of a large black cat or a dog, and those who live in the vicinity prefer to give the valley a wide berth. Hauntings by creatures of this type are very common throughout Antigonish and Cape Breton. They seem to me to be closely akin to the Egyptian theories of metempsychosis: apparently the soul of the individual who has placed his ego at the disposal of the Evil One is condemned after death to enter the body of a dog, a cat or a snake.

The Bochain of Cape Breton, which haunts the region of swamps, is not unlike the "water horse" of the Shetland Islands. This was a mischievous creature which delighted in frightening travellers, and had the habit of lying in wait in the dusk for people to pass along the road. Then he would appear in the form of a docile horse, and intimate to a weary foot-traveller that his back was broad and strong. As soon as the misguided individual had mounted upon it, however, the water horse starting slowly gradually increased his speed until a blue haze surrounded him, flames burst from his feet, and fiery smoke poured from his mouth and nostrils, while fire flashed from his eyes. The terrified rider, unable to escape from his frightful steed, clung to him in distracted horror until the horse plunged into the lake and disappeared, leaving the man to drown or escape as best he could. The water horse, or Njogel, seemed to prefer to carry his victims into lakes, but sometimes he took them to the sea or to the mouths of rivers, and sometimes he jumped over a cliff into water which lay beneath it. Only if the victim had sufficient presence of mind to call on God's name, or call the Njogel by his name, had he any chance of escape; but if he did either one or the other, the Njogel would immediately vanish from under him.

Shetlandic folklore is supposed to be of Scandinavian origin; it is closely related to the folk lore of the Orkneys, and crept from thence down the west and east coasts of Scotland. It is therefore a simple matter to understand this source of the folklore of Cape Breton.

I must admit, though I am aware that in making such a statement I shall risk the disapproval of all good Nova Scotians, that I was intensely disappointed in the celebrated *Rand* collections of Micmac legend. After much difficulty I succeeded in borrowing a copy of the book, and read it after I had heard certain stories related by Indians. To me this collection is in no way representative of the lore of the people. Whether in the translation into English the "atmosphere" of the original became confused, or whether—

as seems likely—the translator was at times made the victim of one of those tricks which Indians delight to play upon the credulity of the White man, I do not know. But in several instances the stories are very distinctly coloured with the influence of the White race. Many of them also lack entirely that dignity of expression and that poetic imagery which are so marked in the character and the language of the Indian. In some cases they bear scarcely any resemblance to Indian lore at all.

The field for the folklorist in Nova Scotia alone is immense, and it has the very unusual feature of offering most excellent facilities for comparison. For there are many different races of people living in the Province, each of which has retained intact its own store of tales, legends, sayings. There is the Gaelic lore (both Scotch and Irish), the Micmac, the French Acadian, and the Negro, while in Lunenburg county there are still to be found traces of the old German. If the collector is able to travel as far north as Ingonish, it is highly probable that he will meet individuals who can relate some of the ancient Icelandic sagas. For, far back in the very early days of its colonization, this part of Cape Breton afforded a refuge to men who were anxious to hide themselves for ever from the eyes of their own people. It was a place of concealment for seafaring men of all nations who had deserted from their ships, and many descendants of such refugees still live upon the homesteads wrested by their forbears from the stern land in which they sought the privilege of sanctuary.

There is only one way of collecting genuine folklore, and that is to obtain it direct from the people who have themselves received it in the same manner from those who preceded them. To accomplish this satisfactorily requires a retentive memory and considerable tact. The older people are often shy of telling these stories to strangers, for fear of ridicule. The younger generation are half inclined to ridicule them themselves. Most professional collectors make use of a phonograph when collecting shanties, and by this means they are able to secure both words and music. Some of the shanties sung in Cape Breton and Newfoundland run into sixty or seventy verses, and twenty-five years ago in Newfoundland every fisherman, farm labourer, and cab driver had a song to sing which covered the time required for a seven or eight mile drive.

By far the most difficult lore to obtain is that of the Indians. One has there to deal with a reticent and suspicious people. Moreover, no Indian ever gives any information directly. He does not arrive at the point of his story until he has circled completely round it. To some people he refuses to talk at all, and to some he de-

liberately gives false information. The Negro races, on the other hand, are loquacious and communicative.

Thus, as the years go by, a great deal of folklore disappears in every country. There is no shadow of doubt that those who are interested in preserving all the records and history of the Maritime Provinces should lose no time in making a concerted effort to form a genuine collection of stories, songs and sayings, which would when completed prove a most valuable asset not only to the native born, but to that body of international scientists who are tracing from its earliest source the growth of the human race.

At present only a few isolated individuals are making tentative efforts to collect this lore, and in the absence of a Nova Scotian Folklore Society the work might well be taken up by the Historical Societies already established. The co-operation of schoolteachers might well be secured, especially of those in rural districts, for a great deal of valuable matter can be collected from children. This work requires an expenditure of time and money. It is essentially a work for leisured people, and a long summer vacation offers an excellent opportunity for it. One is surprised to find how much can be extracted from people who at first sight appear to be of a material and practical disposition. Among the best folk tales I ever heard was one told me by a Scotswoman whose mind might reasonably have been expected to be too completely absorbed by everyday matters and the cares of a family to linger round stories of witchings and omens.

"Shut mouth never kept house" is an ancient Celtic axiom once told me quite unexpectedly by an elderly person who came to cut wood. On being asked what it meant, he said that amongst his people it was the belief that a woman who is silent and too yielding in disposition never makes a good housewife. I have not yet found this in any collection of such sayings made in Canada.