

Some Trends in Regional Ethnology in Britain

IN BRITAIN THE EUROPEAN (OR REGIONAL) ETHNOLOGY which the late Sigurd Erixon defined as 'a comparative cultural research on a regional basis with a sociological and historical orientation and with certain psychological implications' has hitherto received much less attention than it deserves as a unified field of investigation. Indeed, ethnology in general has had a rather chequered history in Britain in the present century. Latterly, however, there has been a discernible and welcome tendency to rehabilitate the term as a suitable label for an historically orientated study of cultural phenomena. In part this is due to an attempt to bring such a study in line with developments in other countries, as well as, to a certain dissatisfaction with the earlier term 'folk life' and the conceptual problems which it presents¹.

'Folk life' and its near equivalent 'folk culture' were introduced into Britain under the influence of Scandinavian, especially Swedish, scholarship in the period before the second world war. Although Erixon himself pointed out that the adjective 'folk' meant 'social' and nothing more, he himself at times equated 'folk culture' with living traditional culture as opposed to mobile culture². In fact, it appears to the outside observer that it was 'culture' rather than 'folk' which was the central organising idea of Swedish ethnology in this significant period. Under the influence of Fritz Graebner, whose important work on ethnological method was published in 1911, the modified diffusionist approach characteristic of much of the German *Volkskunde* scholarship of the day came to dominate Swedish ethnology. Culture was seen as a cluster of miscellaneous individual elements — objects of all kinds, customs, songs, tales — which had been brought (one might almost say jumbled) together over a period of centuries by the spread of ideas and techniques throughout the continent. It was this amorphous mass of cultural elements which the ethnologist was to study by recording material objects in the field or bringing selected examples to the museums, and by collecting folklore items, dialect features and information about artefacts, to be stored in archives. The twin institutions of museum and archive had a decidedly positive function in this strategy, namely to collect systematically and selectively such material as was directly relevant to ethnological investigation. In particular the completed questionnaire, an effective means of collecting fairly factual information about the presence or absence or local form of individual culture traits, provided a sound basis for a historical-geographical study. This, in turn, involved the identification of culture areas and the drawing of culture boundaries as well as the investigation of origins and diffusion. The

1. Cf. A. Fenton, 'The Scope of Ethnology', *Folk Life*, 11, 1973, pp. 5—14. For a different view cf. the reference by Dr. Iorwerth C. Peate in a recent review to 'the gadarene path of some European and British scholars who have elected to consider themselves merely "ethnologists"'. *Folklore*, 85, 1974, p. 64.

2. See, for example, his article on 'Folklife Research in our time from a Swedish point of view', *Gwerin*, 3, 1965, 275—293. See also Å. Hultkrantz, 'The Concept of "Folk" in Sigurd Erixon's Ethnological Theory', *Ethnologia Europaea*, 2—3, 1968—9, pp. 18—20.

painstaking compilation of national ethnological atlases, which was another important feature of this approach, showed the rich geographical variety of culture interpreted in this fractionated atomistic sense. This thumb-nail sketch, of course, does less than justice to the wide-ranging studies carried out with impressive scholarship along these lines and ignores many significant later developments in Scandinavian ethnology, notably the influence of British and American social anthropology. Nevertheless it may be said to represent the essential features of the paradigm which was so influential in the introduction of folk culture as an idea into Britain.

The term 'folk culture' seems to have been first used in Britain by Dr. Iorwerth C. Peate in a paper entitled 'Welsh Folk Culture' read at the British Association meeting in York in 1932, in which it refers to a predominantly peasant culture characterised by the historically important role of the craftsman. Later, in 1937, Dr. Peate defined folk culture as the culture or way of life of the whole nation and not that of a particular class. This viewpoint, since reiterated in various articles and books³, regards folk culture as a descriptive rather than an analytical idea and in this respect is essentially that of Swedish regional ethnology. The introduction of this concept to this country came partly through the visits of prominent Swedish scholars, notably the folklorist C. W. von Sydow of Lund and the ethnologist Åke Campbell from Uppsala, who came to Ireland and Wales in 1934. But it was also due to the appearance in 1937 of the journal *Folk-liv*, edited by Sigurd Erixon and aimed at an international readership. A review article by Dr. Peate which appeared in *Antiquity* in 1938 gave a warm welcome to the new journal and particularly to Erixon's important paper on 'Regional European Ethnology' containing his definition of the subject referred to at the beginning of this article.

The acceptance of the Scandinavian interpretation of ethnology was made difficult at the time by its association with diffusionism which was anathema to British anthropologists of the day. The extreme views of Elliot Smith and W. J. Perry — the so-called 'pan-Egyptian hyper-diffusion theory' which Dr. Glyn Daniel dismisses as 'academic rubbish' — had discredited diffusionism generally. The two most influential figures in British anthropology during this period had little sympathy for ethnology. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, in an address given in 1923, which has been described as the charter of modern social anthropology, argued that 'there are two quite different methods of dealing with the facts of culture, and since they are different both in the results they seek and in the logical methods by which they strive to attain those results, it is advisable to regard them as separate though doubtless connected, and to give them different names'. Ethnology he defined as the study of culture, and social anthropology (or 'the new anthropology' as he called it) should seek to formulate the general

3. Iorwerth C. Peate, *Welsh Folk Culture*, *Welsh Outlook*, 1933, pp. 294—7; Diwylliant Gwerin, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Commrodorion*, 1937, pp. 241—50; 'The Study of Folk Life and Its Part in the Defence of Civilization', *Advancement of Science*, 1958, pp. 86—94, (also printed in *Gwerin*, 2, 1959, pp. 97—109); *Tradition and Folk Life*, 1971.

laws that underlie the phenomena of culture⁴. Malinowski's opposition was more outspoken and was directed at the influence of scholars, whom he disparagingly described as 'museum moles', who had linked up diffusionism with 'the inspiration of ill-assorted and ill-defined objects lumped together in the vitrines and cellars of an old building'⁵. Especially under Malinowski's influence, intensive and prolonged fieldwork, totally different in kind from the questionnaire surveys of both sociologists and ethnologists, became the familiar hallmark of British social anthropology. This broadly functionalist ahistorical emphasis also came to dominate the teaching of anthropology in British universities to the almost total exclusion of ethnology from the syllabus. Radcliffe-Brown had been equally concerned to mark off social anthropology from psychology, which he equated with the study of mental processes, but the effect on psychology as a subject was far less damaging. Ethnology, on the other hand, never really recovered from being left out in the cold as incompatible with — if not irrelevant to — the new Durkheimian anthropology.

Fortunately the reception given by archaeology to the new ideas was rather more favourable. Radcliffe-Brown had, in fact, suggested that ethnology and prehistoric archaeology could well be regarded as one historical science. Looked at in this way, what Scandinavian scholars had done had been to bring the pre-industrial countryside, as well as the prehistoric, within the purview of the archaeologist, emphasising all the time the continuity between the two, and using the familiar methods of field archaeology. In the words of O. G. S. Crawford, an influential figure in this period, archaeology was the past tense of anthropology, and continental ethnology was clearly relevant. Crawford's journal *Antiquity* published from time to time in the thirties articles of a broadly folk-life character (such as Sir Cyril Fox's paper on 'Sleds, carts and wagons' which appeared in 1931) as well as the review article on 'Folk-liv' referred to previously. The attraction which folk culture came to have for archaeologists in this period is not difficult to understand, and is illustrated very clearly in an article by Cecil Curwen on 'The Hebrides as a cultural backwater' which appeared in *Antiquity* in 1938. In a rather patronising way, Curwen argued that the culture of the Hebrides, because of its remoteness, had not emerged from the Iron Age until the middle of the last century, and therefore its black houses, beehive-shape huts, querns and other primitive elements could all be effectively used to illuminate the pre-Roman Iron Age in southern Britain. This is, of course, an extreme case, but other archaeologists, notably Sir Cyril Fox, J. G. D. Clark and more recently Charles Thomas, have felt this fascination. Professor Thomas has gone so far as to suggest that the archaeologist 'who deliberately neglects the evidence available to him from folk-life study is cutting himself off from about one quarter of the possible evidence, if not indeed more'⁶. This view of ethnology as a sort of latter-day archaeology, taking its relevance from prehistory, is, of

4. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Method in Social Anthropology*, 1958, p. 7.

5. B. Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and other essays*, 1944, p. 20—1.

6. Charles Thomas, 'Archaeology and Folk-Life Studies', *Gwerin*, 3, 1960, p. 7.

course, only superficially flattering. However, there can be no doubt that such an attitude did, in fact, make the idea of folk culture more acceptable to archaeologists than to anthropologists in this period.

THE EMERGENCE OF A TRUE ETHNOLOGY from the common interest in culture traits and their distributions, which would have paralleled the continental ethnology of the day, did not occur, despite the distinct possibilities which existed. Fox's influential book 'The Personality of Britain' (1932), with its pronounced diffusionistic interpretation of prehistoric culture distributions and its argument that the Highland and Lowland zones of Britain showed markedly different cultural propensities, could well have laid the foundation for an orthodox ethnology of the British Isles complete with the compilation of an atlas of folk culture. That this did not materialize was, in part, due to the absence of any means of collecting detailed local information from correspondents. No attempt was made to establish a network of informants on the basis of which significant data could be assembled. Fox himself had relied on the knowledge gained from random finds and unco-ordinated excavations, and the same approach could not profitably be used in ethnology. The only direction in which this development did take place — and Fox was also involved in this — was in the study of vernacular architecture which blossomed in the post-war period. The lines on which vernacular architecture is studied today could probably be quite correctly described as ethnological in the classical continental sense, but it is clear that Fox and Raglan, who pioneered the detailed regional recording and study of buildings in Britain with their volumes on Monmouthshire Houses, were far more conscious of extending and developing an archaeological tradition of scholarship than of importing or establishing a new one. Yet it is arguable that the study of vernacular architecture is probably the only major form of regional ethnology — and a purely home-grown variety — which has really taken root in England in recent years. The reasons for this are not hard to find, for the house is one of the few distinctive artefacts belonging to pre-industrial England which has survived the enclosure of the open fields and the early introduction of commercial and scientific farming — not to mention the ravages of the Industrial Revolution — *in situ* and in sufficiently large numbers and variety to be studied today as historical evidence. In fact, the study of vernacular architecture, and to some extent, of industrial archaeology (for which abundant material survives in Britain), may be said to have filled the vacuum left by the underdevelopment of ethnology in this country.

In a rather similar manner the study of British (and Irish) rural life has stemmed not from any conscious ethnological tradition but from the application of approaches and methods of field-work developed by social anthropologists in the analysis of primitive society. The works of Arensberg and Kimball, Alwyn D. Rees, W. M. Williams, Ronald Frankenberg, Isabel Emmett, James Littlejohn and others, represent an incursion on to the traditional (but neglected) territory of the ethnologist, using the microsociological methods of the anthropologist and a

different conceptual apparatus⁷. In the process, the inadequacies of the purely synchronic approach have been recognized in some, if not most, of the works cited, and the historical perspective is more evident in recent studies such as David Jenkins' volume on *"The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century"*, and Alan Macfarlane's work on *"Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England"*. Furthermore, not only is the new variety of anthropology which these studies represent far more sympathetic to the general diachronic approach of ethnology, but history itself, as a discipline, has shown increasing interest in such related subjects as the contents of people's homes in the past, the constitution of various social classes and their cultural and economic environment, and in the use of oral evidence relating to the recent past. In particular, the ease with which the tape recorder can be used has helped to direct the historian's attention to a neglected source of information, the sheer abundance of which threatens to overwhelm him. In this sphere the interests of the oral historian and the ethnologist clearly overlap. While the recollections of first-hand participants are obviously vital to the historian's reconstruction of the recent past, there is a shadowy area where evidence obtained at second or even third hand can be recorded and evaluated, and where oral history merges with oral tradition. The nature of the evidence perceptibly changes, and the investigator has to contend with different problems such as the validity of hearsay testimony, the fallibility (and malleability) of human memory, and the accuracy of the composite reconstruction of past cultural conditions pieced together in this way. These problems are obviously relevant to the ethnologist.

Perhaps the most interesting development in this respect has been the recent emergence of peasant studies as an interdisciplinary field in a country, such as Britain, which has hitherto had very little to say to the peasant, or, indeed, about him. Generally speaking, the concept of peasantry has been very little used by British social anthropologists. It is essentially macrosociological rather than microsociological in emphasis, and it is arguably only relevant to the study of the British scene in an historical approach. Certainly one cannot speak as Tamas Hofer does, with reference to continental Europe, of the contrast between the long-established scholarly study of traditional, especially peasant, culture from within and along ethnographical lines, and the newly-discovered anthropological study of the peasantry from the outside⁸. Historians such as Barrington Moore have argued that the English peasant had virtually disappeared by the early nineteenth century with the success of the enclosure movement⁹. Richard Dorson, in a recent history of folklore in Britain, has argued that 'the genius of the

7. C. M. Arensberg and S. T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland*, 1940; A. D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside*, 1950; W. M. Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village*, Goshforth, 1956; R. Frankenberg, *Village on the Border*, 1957; I. Emmett, *A North Wales Village*, 1964; J. Littlejohn Westrigg, *The Sociology of a Cheviot Parish*, 1963.

8. T. Hofer, 'Anthropologists and Native Ethnographers in Central European Villages: Comparative Notes on the Professional Personality of Two Disciplines', *Current Anthropology*, 9, 1968, pp. 311-5.

9. Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 1966.

English folklore movement lay in daring systems and ingenious speculation conceived at the writing desk and in the library; none of the Great Team ever ventured in the field¹⁰. With the important exception of a dozen or so active 'county collectors' of folklore in the late nineteenth century, haphazardly located, little contemporary attention was given specifically to the vanishing peasant. Nevertheless it can still be useful to think in terms of residual elements of 'peasantness' in both an economic and a cultural sense, in undertaking ethnological research. The economic interpretation of peasantry, which some anthropologists, notably Raymond Firth and, to a certain extent, Eric Wolf, have regarded as crucial, sees the peasant as a small-scale farmer or craftsman concerned only to produce enough to keep himself and his family and to pay his dues in the form of taxes and rents. Peasant society viewed in this way is one dominated by such smallholders, isolated, as Karl Marx emphasised in discussing the nineteenth-century French peasantry, by their mode of production, and displaying marked regional differences in cultural and social organisation. Much of the contemporary interest in peasant studies has lain in the application of this approach to the objective study of political behaviour, but there are obvious implications too for regional ethnology. It is clear that a society can be more (or less) peasant-like in character according to the proportion of small-scale producers who operate a subsistence-orientated peasant economy. It can also include other elements which are possibly peasant in a cultural, though not in an economic, sense — agricultural labourers, farmers producing mainly for the market, small entrepreneurs, worker-peasants, fishermen and so on. In fact, there may well be, as in many parts of Wales and in the Hebrides in the past, a smallholder or crofter group enjoying a symbiotic relationship with farmers operating on commercial lines. Certainly rural Wales, and probably many other parts of Britain, had a 'mixed' economy in this sense at the turn of the century; indeed, it is in the changing nature of the mix that much of the sociological interest of the nineteenth century lies — the contracting peasant sector, and the expanding commercial sector which, by today, dominates rural life. The point which needs to be stressed is that what is loosely described as folk culture, the traditional field of ethnological investigation, belongs mainly to this peasant sector — tools and implements made of local material, used with orally transmitted skill and knowledge to exploit the resources of the local environment to the uttermost in a number of regional variations. A consideration of this economic dimension of peasantry, even in retrospect, can obviously help the ethnologist to make sense of his material. The associated values, such as the emphasis on thrift, the distrust of money and the desire not to get involved in a market economy more than is absolutely necessary, are, of course, also relevant. Working on such lines of approach it is possible to analyse traditional crafts as socio-technical systems involving the interplay of man and implement in a given social and physical environment, as well as in terms of the artefacts themselves, their distribution, typology and morphology.

10. Richard Dorson. *The British Folklorists: A History*, 1968; p. 316.

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER has been to deal only briefly with some of the more significant influences on ethnology in Britain during recent decades. It is hoped that enough has been said to suggest the more favourable intellectual climate which exists today, in both anthropology and history, so far as regional ethnology as that subject was defined by Erixon is concerned. The points of contact and stimulus are many and transcend the boundaries of established disciplines. In the absence of any extensive formal teaching of ethnology in the universities in Britain, and in the unlikelihood that this situation will change very much in the foreseeable future, it is realistic to think of ethnological studies, like peasant studies, remaining a composite and even discrete collection of specialities involving the use of a variety of methods of investigation shared with (or borrowed from) other disciplines. This diversity, reflecting as it does the changing intellectual scene in this country, does not militate against the development of what Sigurd Erixon would have understood by regional ethnology any more than it impedes the development of peasant studies. Instead of seeking a single systematic and comprehensive approach which ignores this diversity, it would seem more prudent to draw upon current developments in adjacent fields to fertilize our ideas and research. We may then eventually arrive at a synthesis which will articulate with an European regional ethnology which is advocated under another name by Arensberg, practised under another name by F. G. Bailey and his research students in their of the mechanics of social life in west European communities, and so richly developed over the last few decades at the national or regional level in the orthodox continental and Scandinavian traditions¹¹.

11. C. M. Arensberg, 'The Old World Peoples: The Place of European Cultures in World Ethnography', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 36, 1963 pp. 75—99; F. G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils*, 1969, and *Gifts and Poison, The politics of reputation*, 1971.