
Just occasionally a book appears that is stimulating, scholarly, and even formidable. Monstrous Fishes is one such, drawing upon classical antiquity, Islamic travellers, Icelandic sagas, Norse law-codes, archaeology, ecology, folklore, and ethnography/ethnology. Chapter titles give a fairly clear indication of content but cannot easily reflect a spiral approach that periodically revisits from differing perspectives material from different disciplines and periods. This might suggest a book not always or everywhere easy to read, but any concern is minimized by an infectious enthusiasm and discursive style. The first two chapters present evidence for medieval whaling in its broadest European context — the influence of Greek and Roman writings on biblical tradition and European folklore. The next three focus on North Atlantic whaling history — ecosystems and a comparative treatment of prehistoric and ethnological whaling practices, principally from the Faroes to the Arctic. The final three chapters explore how northern peoples, particularly medieval Norwegian and Norse island communities, viewed and used whales.

To early writers, whales were strange and familiar, monstrous (where not diabolical) and mundane, a menace at sea and problematical onshore where ownership was frequently challenged. Some sources discuss ‘whale appearance and interactions with both human and other marine creatures’ (p. 34); others give a glimpse of how man exploited whale meat. So Pliny the Elder (late first century AD) describes the catching of killer whales and Procopius a whale chasing dolphins, beaching itself and subsequently killed, shared out and transported in waggons (pp. 38–40). Ottar’s ninth-century journey to northern Norway records sixty whales some forty eight to fifty ells long (c. 75 ft/29 m), reputedly killed by six people in two days (pp. 59–60).

In his thirteenth-century De Animalibus, Albertus Magnus describes small boats with three-man teams of hunters using single-barb harpoons (sometimes launched from a ‘powerful ballista’) to spear and repeatedly wound a large whale until it could be towed ashore. He also refers to beaching and flensing (on the coast of Friesland and nearby islands) of whales caught in the North Sea or the Atlantic; and to extraction of sperm oil, rendering down of blubber, retrieval of baleen and bones and the quantities of flesh and bone removed from individual carcasses (pp. 61–65). Given that blubber was likely rendered at the coast, Szabo suggests that transport for oil might well have been additional to the 300 waggons for flesh and bones.

From an ethnological viewpoint this is all valuable, as is the cultural contextualization of that world travelled, colonized, and inhabited by Norse North Atlantic peoples — communities that more than most in Europe have long depended on whales and developed strategies for their capture and exploitation. Ethnological content features specifically in chapter 4, and widely elsewhere. ‘Both history and ethnography reveal the innumerable uses of whale products in the ancient and modern North Atlantic from flesh to bone to blubber to waste’ (p. 84); and sagas and law-codes shed considerable light on ownership rights, allocations, and disputes. A detailed analysis of visible evidence for medieval whale butchery accompanies illustrations from Olaus Magnus and Scandinavian law-codes, especially Jónsbók (pp. 270–75), but medieval texts rarely deal with such everyday practical matters as what happened after a whale was beached, butchered, and divided.
However, there is extensive archaeological as well as ethnological evidence for its importance for fashioning tools and other objects — a good substitute for wood and ivory (and presumably sometimes pottery). Vertebrae provided stools and containers, and almost any piece could have been used as a cutting surface, whether as a chopping block or maybe a board for cutting leather or preparing food. Northern archaeology has revealed whalebone digging tools, mattock heads and tether stakes, gaming boards and pieces, weaving combs and swords (the latter from a pilot whale’s rib), flax scutching knives and linen smoothing boards — including a fine example from the boat burial at Scar (Sanday, Orkney) but most likely originating in Norway (pp. 128, 150–61, fig. 12). The list is almost endless. In later times, large whale vertebrae or pilot whale skulls have occasionally been used to build croft dykes in the Northern Isles (and a pilot whale skull to shore up a boat on a Shetland beach); and pilot whale ribs continued to be used as lins, ‘rollers’ over which boats were hauled up the beach (p. 148).1 Tools and techniques for working whalebone were fairly basic and in most cases required relatively little skill since whalebone was easily worked and most artefacts needed little more than simple cutting, hollowing out, and/or trimming.

In her survey, Szabo not only highlights the characteristics of different kinds of whalebone, but considers the impact of residual oils within the bone and how this affects their processing and working. Since cauldrons, medieval or modern, were too small for boiling off flesh and oils from very large bones, this implies that most whale (as opposed to animal) bone would have been left exposed to the elements for months, if not years, before it could be used (pp. 160–61).

Although few non-ethnological sources deal in any detail with the tools and techniques of hunting, killing, butchery, and processing, Szabo makes many pertinent points (pp. 93–96):

- Every strategy used to take whales is based on knowledge of whale behaviours and seafaring skills acquired over time, generally many centuries
- Tools and technologies used in subsistence whaling relate closely to those used in fishing and other forms of hunting
- The basic technology is simple
- Taking whales at sea was not beyond the capabilities of pre-modern technologies
- Securing naturally-stranded whales was probably the most significant means of acquisition, but did not rule out scavenging those wounded or killed at sea by other hunters and subsequently lost
- The submarine topography of certain bays and beaches, maybe or sometimes linked to whales’ sonar malfunctions, triggered repeated strandings in certain locations
- Whales were known to congregate in certain places, which may have encouraged the rounding-up of small whales and other cetaceans
- Ethnological analogies from the Norse North Atlantic provide invaluable data on hunting and butchery methods largely absent in other sources, but which may originate in prehistory or the Middle Ages
- More like hunting than fishing, whaling is necessarily both communal and individual, high-risk, but also prestigious
- Pre-industrial whaling highlights the need for community organisation and cooperation, specialist knowledge, training, and leadership
- Whales were a formidable quarry for prehistoric, medieval and subsistence peoples, but difficulties were maybe less with hunting them and more with the labour and logistics needed to allocate, preserve and transport large amounts of whale meat, blubber and bones.

Drawing mainly on Nelson Annandale, Kenneth Williamson, Jóan Pauli Joensen, Dorete Bloch, and Ole Lindquist, the Faroese grind is discussed in detail (pp. 94–107). Accepting Lindquist’s view that spears and lances were the ‘key killing tools in the Middle Ages’ (the spear to wound and the lance to kill), Szabo considers the long, slender-bladed, hand-made
grindaknívur (stamped with the knife-smith’s mark and developed to cut the spinal cord) to reflect the particular importance of pilot whale drives to Faroese culture — as does Faroe’s Seyðabrævið, with legislative references to whale drives absent from related medieval Norwegian and Icelandic law-codes.

There is little discussion of whale drives elsewhere in the North Atlantic, however. A mid-thirteenth-century reference to ‘blubber-cutters’ tells how they were caught and driven to land in their hundreds in Norway; and the Annals of Ulster record a ‘great slaughter of porpoises on the coast of Ard Cianachta by the foreigners’, the Norse, in 828 AD (pp. 109–10) — reminiscent of a nineteenth-century porpoise catch by the Blasket islanders. Given that Szabo’s definition of the Norse North Atlantic includes seas surrounding the British Isles as far south as the ‘English’ Channel, fuller discussion of post-medieval Scottish whale drives would have been valuable (evidence dates back to the sixteenth century). And what of further Irish evidence or evidence for Wales, Man, or England? It would help plot the practice, distribution, and relative strength of pilot whaling in other island groups and maybe mainland areas that were heirs to Norse settlement and culture, and add an enhanced dimension to our understanding of cultural diffusion in the British Isles over an extended timescale. This reflects a rare criticism of Monstrous Fishes — whilst strong on North American, archaeological, and literary source material, it is patchy with regard to British, Irish, Scandinavian, and European ethnology/ethnography.

Something similar applies to open-sea whaling. Lindquist considered that hand-held harpoons were not used until the seventeenth century on open seas, that medieval jabbing weapons were simply that, and that their use was likely limited to inshore and bay whaling (p. 107). Szabo develops this by suggesting there is no clear surviving ethnographic evidence for pre-industrial open-sea whaling around the Norse North Atlantic (p. 110). Maybe so, but let us not forget the tradition (legend? myth?) that the men of the Monach Isles, west of North Uist, once went whaling as far as St Kilda, even Rockall, in single-masted galleys with 18–24 oars, towing their catch back to Heisker for flensing.

Szabo’s discussion of medieval history and literature focuses on three main sources: the mid-thirteenth-century King’s Mirror from Norway, ninth- to eleventh-century Islamic travellers, and Olaus Magnus’s mid-sixteenth-century Carta Marina (1539) and Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus (1555). Albeit bypassing the Hebrides (parts of which were as strongly Norse as Scotland’s Northern Isles), she acknowledges that, whilst all North Atlantic communities recognized the value of whales and other maritime resources, dependence not only varied from place to place but reflected cultural choice as much as ecological necessity. Leastways that is the explanation given for lack of whalebone in Pictish sites on Rousay (Orkney) (pp. 72–75) and for the historical reliance on whales by modern Norway, Iceland, and the Faroes and much lesser reliance by Denmark, Sweden, and Scotland’s Northern Isles. Other than in times of ‘hardship, famine and war’, the latter exploited them for ‘fuel’ rather than for food (p. 179) — though their oil was used locally for more than lighting in recent centuries. Be that as it may, such sources have as much value for ethnologists as for medievalists. In The King’s Mirror, for instance (pp. 186–87):

- Small ‘blubber-cutters’ (large dolphins?) were particularly favoured by subsistence hunters, were not dangerous to boats or to humans, and were driven to the shore in their hundreds for food as were porpoises and pilot whales
- The reyður, rorqual (any of the big baleen whales, Blue, Fin, or Sei) was favoured above all others since it was non-aggressive, swam close to boats, was highly edible, could be used medicinally and seemingly did not smell
- Some other large whales were eaten where available, not least the Sperm, Greenland, White (Beluga), and Baleen whales
- Others were good eating but not eaten: Humpback and Right whales were too dangerous and to be avoided; the ‘Fish driver’ (Fin whale) was protected since it herded sought-after fish, especially herring shoals towards the shore (an example of developed and inherited ecological awareness amongst indigenous communities)
Yet others were designated *illhveli*, really bad whales, inedible and to be avoided at sea: the Beaked and Hog whale were too fatty, the Narwhal ‘poisonous’, the ‘horse whale’ and ‘red comb’ unfit to eat and ‘natural enemies’.

To what extent reputations were born of decaying beached corpses and food poisoning is unclear, but those found by experience to be inedible or indigestible presumably acquired a mythology over time as harmful and monstrous. Indeed, there is much to stimulate the folklorist in *Monstrous Fishes*. As Szabo puts it (pp. 188–89), it is difficult to know whether the generally invisible sea serpent of Shetland folklore (kin to *The King’s Mirror*’s *kraken* and the *Old Norse* *Miðgarðsormr*) was ‘real’ or ‘mythical’.

Whilst *The King’s Mirror* says nothing about hunting methods, hints may be gleaned from two centuries earlier. The Islamic Spanish geographer ‘al-Udhrī gives a unique insight into mid-eleventh-century whaling by the Hiberno-Norse’ (pp. 191–92). His account relates to whale calves — a delicacy:

- The hunters gathered in boats
- They had ‘a great iron blade, with sharp spikes’ incorporating a strong iron ring and strong cable
- They clapped their hands to make a noise when they found a calf, and the calf came up to the boat
- A designated hunter rubbed the calf’s forehead, then put the blade to the middle of its head and hit it three times with an iron mallet
- As it wearied, the calf stopped struggling and boat crews took turns to drag it to the shore
- To prevent the mother whale following, they scattered ‘much powdered garlic’ on the water
- Ashore, they cut up and salted the meat: ‘Its meat is white like snow, and its skin black as ink’.

Modern understanding of whale behaviour and appearance suggests this was a Right whale or one of the Beaked whales, more particularly the Northern Bottlenose. And however fanciful the account may once have seemed, Szabo compares it closely to practices common amongst northern whalers (especially in the Arctic and circumpolar regions) from prehistory to more recent times (pp. 113–15).

A century later, c. 1154, the ‘Nubian Geographer’ al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī remarked on ‘the barbarity of the primitive inhabitants of the “Inner isles of Britain”’. He also noted that these peoples used the bone and vertebrae of large ‘sea animals’ instead of wood to build houses, and used whalebone to make clubs, lances, spears, daggers, seats, and ladders. Szabo considers this a realistic account of northern practice (rather than ‘a contemporary northern corollary for the classical wonders of the eastern world’ given in Strabo and Arrian for Indian Ocean cultures) (pp. 194–96), and points to a late ninth-century Islamic text by al-Masūdī containing the loan word *uwa¯l* (from AS *hval* or ON *hvalur*) and to Olaus Magnus’ account of whale use (including whalebone houses) in sixteenth-century northern Norway (pp. 196–210).

The final two chapters offer a detailed analysis of whaling as recorded in medieval Icelandic sagas and law-codes — the Norwegian *Gulathing*, *Lagabætir*, and *Frostathing*, the Faroese *Seyðabrævið* and the Icelandic *Grágás* and *Jónsbók* (pp. 243 et seq.). For example, it is not known whether women participated in whale drives, hunts, or scavenging in earlier times (they have not done so traditionally in post-medieval Faroe or Scotland’s Northern and Western Isles). But the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century *Fornaldarsögur* (Legendary sagas) betray a quite specific association between whales and giantesses, witches or troll-women — ‘the uncontrolled troll-woman drove away any fish, hoarded whales or controlled both […] and whales were the servants of troll-women’ (pp. 221 et seq.) Szabo affirms the negative links between women and nature in Old Norse and Old Icelandic literature (both seen as uncontrolable and dangerous), and draws attention to Icelandic, Faroese, Shetland, and Orkney folklore where ‘Women who participated in the whale drive or any aspect of whaling […] were
transgressing social and natural boundaries. [...] Women and whales simply equalled trouble’. After a crew refused to take her son in one of the boats, his Shetland mother uttered an incantation said to have caused the almost total failure of whale drives in Scapa Flow (Orkney) after c. 1850 (pp. 222–24). That she was not just a woman with a magic thimble, but from elsewhere, confirmed that troublemakers were not only witches, but generally also strangers or foreigners.6

Family sagas, meantime, tell something of ‘whale use, perceptions of whales and the complexities of human ecology and the medieval North Atlantic. [...] and] offer a remarkably pragmatic view of whale use’. Whales were particularly important when other subsistence resources were unavailable, taking their place ‘alongside fish, seals, driftwood, eggs and birds as important gathered or hunted resources’ (pp. 228–29). But they were never just ‘famine food’. Although not crucial in the same way as crops and domestic animals, stranded whales were a valuable dietary addition and represented unexpected and potential wealth — as opposed to tangible, surplus, and disposable assets that could be given as gifts and represented power (pp. 228–32).

If saga evidence suggests scavenging rather than hunting to have been the norm, law-codes show the situation as much more difficult and obscure (pp. 240–47). Where whales were hunted, the laws were straightforward — ‘spear a whale in common waters and it is yours’ (p. 248). In contrast, laws relating to claiming and dividing strandings were highly complex and readily led to conflict. It may be thought that definition would be straightforward (pp. 249 et seq.). For example:

- Active hunting took place at sea by using spears/harpoons, with or without driving
- Scavenging related to drifting whales, either dead, dying or simply floating on the sea
- Scavenging related also to stranded whales washed ashore on either common or private ground.

But whales could easily shift from one category to another:

- Hunted whales could break away from a hunter’s rope and become drift whales (although still carrying an owner-marked spear/harpoon)
- Drift whales could become stranded whales when they beached themselves
- Stranded whales could become drift whales again if they floated off — and could beach again elsewhere.

So even if hunting and scavenging were seen as separate activities, they were frequently inextricably linked — especially once the whales reached the shore. After examining the northern law-codes, Szabo is clear that whales were resources to be legislated for like any other and that their allocation was never an unregulated, random act (pp. 258–75). Other than for the Faroes, however, she does not contextualize the medieval story by discussing subsequent northern laws or the inter-relationship of regulatory change and changing circumstances triggered by evolving technologies, social and economic conditions, increased populations, declining whale stocks, and climate change. Whilst secondary to her study, this could help clarify the degree to which changing ecologies and circumstances require the periodic adjustment of human systems — a tortuous task for the unique confrontation between udal and feudal law in Shetland and Orkney, but one for which sources and analyses are increasingly available.7

Szabo concludes, inter alia, that medieval whaling was primarily shore-based or shorewards-driven. Opportunistic spearing at sea required a wait to see whether the wounded whale could be recovered; and if not, both whale and hunting equipment would be lost. So a key question was whether whale-hunting was worth the effort and investment (p. 257) — a question as relevant to later subsistence and localized whaling.8 Whilst there is fleeting evidence for active pre-industrial pelagic whaling, it is unlikely to have been dominant and cannot be equated or compared with industrial whaling and an exploding harpoon that over-rode sustainable traditional practices, decimated whale populations and largely killed off the ‘old ways of
whaling’ in all but the most isolated and traditional Faroese (and Greenlandic) communities (pp. 281–83). That said, ethnological investigation shows surviving traditional practices to have taken note of new technologies and modernized to provide greater safety for the hunters and develop speedier, more efficient and more humane ways of killing driven whales.9

‘Both tantalizing in potential and imperfect in fact, our knowledge of the importance of whaling to medieval northern peoples sheds new light on their resourcefulness. It also gives historical depth to the cultural practices of their descendants, early and modern Scandinavians who continue to use whales today’ (p. 279). Albeit focusing primarily on medieval whaling, Monstrous Fishes covers so much more than its title suggests. Painstakingly researched, strongly interdisciplinary, and a few little niggles apart,10 it gives access to vast amounts of material largely absent from post-medieval ethnological records and underlines how much traditional knowledge and wisdom has been lost in later times. This review is necessarily selective, but whatever its other virtues (and there are many), Monstrous Fishes is an invaluable resource for ethnologists and folklorists. A pity about the price!

Notes

1 For discussion of mainly post-medieval uses of whales and whalebone in Scotland’s Northern and Western Isles, see J.R. Baldwin, ‘Subsistence Whaling in the Western and Northern Isles of Scotland’, in Whaling and the Hebrides, ed. by J. Randall (Kershader, Lewis: Islands Book Trust, 2008), pp. 87–103 and fig. 16.


3 See Baldwin, pp. 84–87, for a preliminary discussion of suitable locations for whale drives in the Scottish islands, the declining incidence of drives from north to south, and possible correlations between post-medieval survivals and areas of one-time Scandinavian settlement.


5 See Baldwin, pp. 96–103. Whilst most of the oil was sold commercially, it was valued locally as a medicine, tonic, lubricant and rust inhibitor, as well as lamp-oil.

6 Baldwin, pp. 88–89, refers to the Shetland/Orkney woman’s incantation (the spell was never broken because her shore-buried thimble was never found) and also to Faroese traditions wherein pregnant women had the same effect as witches, and priests were enlisted to drive out witchcraft and bring back the whales.


8 The ramshackle collection of old implements used historically to take caain’ whales in Scotland’s islands reflects the whales’ generally minor, happen-chance importance. See Baldwin, pp. 72–73, 78–79, 82–84.

9 For discussion of recent changes in the Faroe Islands, see J. Olsen, ‘The Pilot Whale Drive Hunt in the Faroe Islands’, in Randall, pp. 131–48. For brief references to eighteenth to twentieth-century hunting for basking sharks in Lochranza Bay (Firth of Clyde) and for small (mainly killer) whales in the Minch (from Barra, Vatersay, and South Uist), see Baldwin, pl. 17, p. 87, notes 20 and 35. An increasingly commercial, albeit small-scale and localized fishery emerged intermittently, but islanders did not always have the resources to acquire suitable boats and equipment.

10 Apart from the almost inevitable typos (e.g. ‘north-east’, not ‘northwest’ Atlantic (p. 78) and ‘eleventh century’, not ‘ninth century’ (p. 102)), it would have been handy to add to the helpful list of North Atlantic whales (Appendix) their standard, dialect, and folk names in, e.g., Old Norse and the later Northern languages, some of which are referred to within the text. But these are minor quibbles and in no way detract from a splendid study.

John Baldwin


In Killing Tradition, Simon Bronner makes a convincing case that the arguments between hunters and animal rights activists reflect deeper moral concerns of modern society, ultimately
based in opposing views of modernity itself. Bronner, a folklorist, takes an anthropological and folkloristic approach. He uses a certain amount of participant observation and interviews with members of both sides, but prefers to use text in the broad sense — his primary interest is in extracting the symbolic content of words, images, and actions. Bronner examines three types of hunting that have been the foci of active controversy and opposition. In the deer hunting camps of Pennsylvania, groups (almost exclusively male) spend time hunting together and living in a cabin, where jokes, stories, and rituals such as cutting the shirt tale off an unsuccessful hunter serve as male bonding, and boys are initiated into the group and its values. At the pigeon shoot at Hegin, also in Pennsylvania, competition participants shot at live pigeons released from wooden ‘traps’. The event, one of many similar in the nineteenth century, survived until recently in part as an attempt to craft a community identity for both social and commercial purposes. In England, hare-courting, where pairs of dogs chase hares in a defined space under the eyes of betting spectators, became part of battles over land use, urban vs. rural communities and ideas, and related fights concerning fox hunting. Legislation in 2004 put an end to a tradition running back to Elizabethean times, but not to the acrimony.

In all of these cases, opposed views of tradition play a large part. The hunters appeal to a long tradition of hunting, which to them symbolizes stability and continuity with an idealized past, a past of (mostly manly) self-sufficiency, courage, hardy life outdoors, and valued skills, or, in England, gentleman’s sport. The opposition view of tradition is less clearly articulated by the animal activists, but Bronner makes a good case that they see hunting traditions as an anachronistic connection to a brutal past, which should now be abandoned in favor of a more humane and moral world. Both sides appeal for liberty and justice, be it for the right of individuals and communities to follow their traditional cultural ways without the interference of others, or for a wider moral circle that respects the rights and freedoms of animals as well as humans.

Bronner takes very much a symbolist approach, which is often quite effective. He feels that the ‘praxis’ of hunting, and the meanings of the ways people hunt, as opposed to stories about hunting, has been a neglected field in folklore studies, but remains rich in symbolism. It is not hard to find symbols in the animals, the blood, the weapons, and the action of hunting that reflect core values of society, and relate to gender, especially masculinity, sexuality, life and death, nature vs. culture, human vs. animal, and so on. Many of these can be articulated or at least recognized by the actors on the ground as well as the scholarly observer. Some of the historical material is particularly interesting, as are the overt symbols marshalled by both sides in their struggle for the moral high ground and the support of public opinion. However, because symbols are arbitrary and infinitely manipulatable, the academic is tempted to stretch them far beyond any reasonable interpretation the hunters or their opponents would recognize. In particular, Bronner is too fond of Freudian symbolism for my taste. You can torture a sexual interpretation out of any symbol, but are complex and multi-link chains of obscure meaning really operating in how most of us view the world? Sometimes they are, but in a world when both society and psychiatry recognize far more complex gender roles than did Victorian England, it no longer makes sense to claim that male competition is ‘a homosexual attack that feminizes the opponent’ (p. 144). Hunting can be convincingly shown to be coming of age and initiation ritual, but should we struggle to see in it an Oedipal killing and replacement of the father? I doubt it, and the hunters I know would roll their eyes and sneer at these extremes.

That is my major criticism of Killing Tradition. I agree with much of the analysis, and Bronner is a good writer, but a ‘high style’ academic writer. This means that some of the people most interested in these ideas, his subjects themselves, will not read this book, and some compelling stories and interesting analyses will go no further than his scholarly audience. It is a bit too far removed from the realities of conscious thought and colloquial communication.

Nevertheless, Killing Tradition did for me what a good book should do: it made me think. The examples Bronner examines are probably not the normative idea of hunting as seen by the majority of Americans. The hunters I know and work with in Iowa and Missouri hunt deer
and other game, and usually not in a social setting comparable to a deer camp. Most are farmers, and hunting is very matter-of-fact for them, part of their recreation and sometimes their subsistence. Shooting pigeons and coursing hares is a bit alien. But I found myself thinking about my friends in new ways, and, if challenged, they would draw on the same ideas of tradition and cultural rights that Bronner identifies as major motifs in the public controversies surrounding deer camps, pigeon shoots, and hare coursing. Most of my students would probably identify more with the anti-hunting side, and approve of their arguments.

*Killing Tradition* is of interest to all students of culture because Bronner uses hunting as a window to explore several deeper issues that impinge on us all. What are the proper relationships between humans and animals? What is our place in the natural world, and in the culturally constructed Nature that we really deal with, especially as access to the outdoors is inevitably decreasing under the pressure of growing population and development? What is the role of tradition in a modernizing world? And, perhaps most relevant to all of us, how are the rights of individuals and small societies that wish to follow their own ways and their own cultural preferences to be balanced against the needs of the larger society and the mores of majorities?

**John C. Whittaker**


Over a hundred-year period, more than a million Swedes immigrated to the United States, and many of them made their home in the Rocky Mountains. In *Up in the Rocky Mountains. Writing the Swedish Immigrant Experience*, Jennifer Eastman Attebery takes a closer look at their letters home in what we might term a ‘steady study of the Rockies’.

In the years 1830 to 1930, 1.3 million Swedes left loved ones, their homeland, but also poverty and religious oppression behind, to go in search of a better life in America. The journey was not always an easy one, but, having made the decision to go, hardships were seldom openly mentioned in the letters home. Instead the letters followed a formula of which Jennifer Eastman Attebery states: ‘members of a culture group communicate in a kind of shorthand that is well understood by insiders and poorly understood by outsiders’. The insider’s reaction to the formula is not ‘How boring. I’ve heard that before’, but rather a reaction of pleasurable recognition, ‘I know what that means; it brings to mind other stories that I know’.

These vernacular letters can be seen as a folk form of writing, and reading immigrant letters as folklore gives us glimpses of the immigrant experience, while at the same time widening the theoretical field of folk text interpretation. In her book, Jennifer Eastman Attebery expands on a less explored part of letter construction, building on Linda Dégh’s (middle segment) analysis of letters, and applying the writings of John Miles Foley, Sandra Dolby Stahl, and Barre Toelken to the study of some three hundred immigrant letters from the West — thus adhering to Alan Dundes’ call for a ‘unified field theory’ of vernacular textual interpretation.

But the book not only deals with theory, it also tells the story of the Swedish immigrant participation in the history of the West, especially in the states of Utah and Colorado: of the awe and appreciation of beauty the immigrants felt on approaching the Rocky Mountains, their involvement in church and society, and the dangers they faced working in the mines, in smelters, and on the railways. It also tells of their gradual transformation from greenhorns (newly-arrived immigrants) to westerners. It is a lesser-known story compared to the epic set in mid-nineteenth-century Minnesota told by Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973).

In her study, Jennifer Eastman Attebery shows a knowledge of older Swedish customs and ways that young Swedes themselves may be unaware of today, for instance when exploring
expressions like med hatten i handen (to stand hat in hand when talking to your boss or someone from a higher social class,) a humbling Swedish courtesy that was not done in America, and therefore celebrated in the letters home and taken as proof of the promise of America.

Jennifer Eastman Attebery’s research is impressive and the translations and interpretations near flawless. She effortlessly moves from textual theory to descriptions of society to the individual experience. Besides adding to immigrant history, the book offers an interesting lesson in the structure of letters, a learned skill you hardly ever consciously think about, except when someone breaks the pattern in an unexpected way, that is. It is a beautifully written book with many merits, including an appendix of letters and a handsome selection of black and white photos (some worthy of being studied not only as immigrant records, but as parallels to Scandinavian and American period paintings).

Marlene Hugoson


Séamus Ennis was a very famous piper and musician, as well as a collector of music and song. He kept this field diary while working full-time with the Irish Folklore Commission, describing his day-to-day work, the people he met, and the material he gathered in Gaeltachtaí in Donegal, Mayo, Connamara, and West Clare.

The diaries were part of the modus operandi of a collector. He was aware that he was privileged in glimpsing something that would not last for much longer, an older way of doing things, of speaking and thinking and living (the unavoidable paranoia of folklore collection). The war years were an immense cultural watershed all over Europe, due not just to war itself, but to changes in technology, people’s standard of living, or communications. Ennis is working in the in-between times; transcribing everything by hand, cycling and walking everywhere, and writing and answering letter after letter, conditions little different from the nineteenth century. In the middle of it all is the Ediphone with its wax cylinders, the car becoming not just something for priests and doctors to own, and phones and wireless beginning to appear. The social history preserved in these pages is worthwhile in itself (going to the Garda barracks for a haircut, for example), a tradition sadly discontinued by the present force, to the best of my knowledge.

The day-to-day life of the collector is central, seeking out informants, weighing and judging people and material, writing up notes and music when the weather would turn against him. His constant fascination with the weather is practical. He was on a bike or on foot going miles and miles each day. Severe weather meant he could not leave the house. Seen from another angle, though, his life is idyllic: living in the Gaeltacht, up to two, three, four, five, and six o’clock at night singing and playing and dancing many nights in the week. Making good friends, and his own music making him welcome in many’s the house. Swimming and messing about in curachái and hookers, going to races and pattern days, dances and parties. Not to mention an occasional drink. He was well fit for it all, it is obvious, an impressively able young man, full of music and talk and intelligence, and it would appear that the girls were breaking their legs after him, as they say, though no hint of this enters into the diary itself.

The whole publication is well presented, comprehensively indexed and researched, music, songs, people and places, peppered with photographs and maps, and examples of tunes and songs Ennis collected in each place. This is an important book, shedding light on a seminal figure in the musical revival in Ireland. Pleasant, musical ghosts from an elder age smile out from its pages. As Ennis says at the end of his first trip: ‘Gabhaim mo bhuíochas do Dhia na Glóire a chuir oiread ceoil i mo bhealach agus oiread sin dea-dhaoine ar m’eolas an chuairt
seo, agus a chumhdaigh saor ó gach uile mí-ádh mé le linn mé bheith ó bhaile’ (‘I thank the God of glory who put so much music my way, and acquainted me with so many lovely people on this visit, and kept me free from all bad luck when I was far from home’).

Gary Hastings


A book on Protestant traditional musicians. Or traditional Protestant musicians, or Protestant players of traditional Irish music, or whatever you are having yourself. As a living exhibit of the species, I was very interested in this book, as you might expect. It is good. It does not over-theorize and allow the whole thing to be choked with sociology and spurious academic discourse. It allows musicians to speak in its pages and to be heard and seen [— pictures!] which leavens the theorizing it does do. There is a substantial booklist, substantial footnotes; the author knows his stuff. But he does not allow that to come between him and the real thing, real life, real people playing music and enjoying it, but being wary and circumspect in the middle of the cultural and political mess that is Northern Ireland.

Fintan Vallely looks at what this music is, where it comes from, and where it is seen to have come from. He compares and contrasts perceptions, looks at the complex permutations which are the reality of culture as it actually exists inside people’s brains and lives. Culture is not simple, and is falsified by simplification. It cannot be reduced to this and this and this, frozen for inspection. It is in constant flux and growth, and Vallely explores this, how tunes are (figuratively speaking) lifted, re-sprayed, and put back out on the road again; same tune, different paint job, different plates, different political/ethnic/religious group. He takes the process away from a merely historical and archival approach. The past is always simpler, more easily re-imaged to suit. The present is messier, harder to compartmentalize, but Vallely boldly goes there, looking at the cultural pressures and influences within the tradition as it exists on a wider context outside the north of Ireland.

The fact that it is in musicians’ voices, through their minds and opinions we travel this country is one of the impressive things about the book. This is not an academic explorer in a strange land. Fintan is a native musician and northerner, and he takes us to good guides to show us round somewhere we may never get a chance to go ourselves. Culture still exists primarily in orality rather than on paper, and since in this case this music and the opinions about it are almost totally oral, it is to the living, talking sources we are taken, rather than mounds of silent paper.

One of the main tasks this book sets itself is illuminating the thick mist of perceptions that exist regarding the music not only in the north, but also in the south of Ireland. Vallely unpeels the layers of paint and symbolism from musical shibboleths and political signposts to show perhaps how little is known about traditional music, but how much is thought, assumed, imagined. While much of the book concerns the north, this is looked at within the development and meaning of the music in the whole island, and the outside influences which channel change and developments. The symbiotic relationship with Scotland, musically and culturally, is introduced and examined in a balanced, realistic way. This is timely as the relatively recent Ulster-Scots cultural movement seems to be as historically and mythically creative as Irish Gaelic Nationalism and Orange Unionism were before it.

If it were only as an overview of Irish traditional music, tracing its development and shape right up to the present day, this would be a good, balanced, concise and well-informed book. The fact that within and through that overview it treats of something ignored by many others as an embarrassment or an anomaly gives it a much greater importance. Though I would say that, wouldn’t I?

Gary Hastings
Community history is a mercurial discipline. Not only are the themes to be explored endless and the sources extremely varied, but the results of the research can be presented in many ways and now through a variety of media. Furthermore, there is quite a debate to be had about the overall purpose of community history itself. Is its prime aim to advance historical knowledge, or should it be undertaken to help foster and strengthen a sense of identity within the community under analysis? Indeed, those people who are actively involved in recording their memories and feelings can be said to be the greatest beneficiaries of this work — the process of creating community histories being more important than the end product.

Many of these issues came to mind as I read these two attractively-produced publications. Both are the product of laudable cooperation between museums, libraries, and archives in Staffordshire, and both have been funded in part through MLA West Midlands. The source of the information contained within both publications was also the same. A series of public meetings were held to provide a forum for group reminiscence on the themes of Stafford’s shoe industry and on life in villages near the borders of Staffordshire. From these open evenings a number of people were identified who could record one-to-one interviews in more depth. All of this information was archived and a selection of comments and short extracts from these testimonies transcribed into print.

As a result of this community engagement a considerable amount of new photographs, documents, and artefacts were brought to the attention of the research team, and this accounts for the many fascinating images that are reproduced in both books. However, neither publication provides a thorough narrative or definitive history of the topics in question, and, to be fair, the editors do not make this claim. Rather, these publications act more as a record of the spoken testimony recorded during the projects and as feedback to those who participated. In many respects they cannot even be seen as commercial publications, as a large number of copies were given away free to Staffordshire schools as learning resources. In this way the communication loop has been completed, where the upcoming community members are provided with the memories of the previous two or even three generations.

So much for the process, but what about the product? Of the two publications, Lasting Impressions is a far more satisfying exercise in community history. A short but informative introduction sketches the history of shoe manufacturing in Stafford from the 1770s until its final demise in 1998, when the Lotus factory closed. This section also illustrates how related manufacturing developed around this dominant trade (in the 1880s, Stafford had 39 shoe factories employing over 3000 people). Boxes, polish, abrasives, cutting equipment, and other specialized machinery were all produced locally to support the shoe industry. The memories by the workers in this industry then make up the bulk of the book. These are arranged in a number of general themes: starting work, the workplace, wartime manufacturing, leisure, and the decline of the industry. The extracts are very short — often no more than a few sentences — but they sketch out well the good and bad experiences of factory life. Sadly, there is virtually nothing from the managers or owners of the factories, and this is a common problem with this method of research. The book concludes with a short glossary of terms used in the shoe industry and two gazetteers of shoe manufacturers and related trades in Stafford. Presumably this was culled from commercial and specialist trade directories, but unfortunately no references are given.

Voices From the Edge looks at a much larger topic — change and identity in three far-flung Staffordshire communities. The three settlements under review are located in the north of Staffordshire, but are quite contrasting. Audley on the west, close to the border with Cheshire, traditionally relied on a mixture of agriculture and coal mining for employment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast, Alstonefield and Tutbury lie to the east, close to the border with Derbyshire. The former settlement is a village strongly reliant on dairying,
while the later is a classic midland market town that developed out of an important medieval castle and estate.

Such complexities are only hinted at in the memories recorded in this publication, and the introduction does not adequately provide the context. Overall, this is a disappointing book. From the start its content seems confused. The title suggests a very interesting and unusual enquiry in community history: how does the location of villages close to a county boundary affect the attitudes and identity of their communities? This is a far more intangible subject than the history of a manufacturing industry and in theory the impressionistic approach used by this type of memory-based research project should have been of great help. However, only three pages at the very end of the book address this topic and with very little outcome other than references to a feud over water supplies between villages across the county border and a vague mention of local accent. The rest of the book is given over to comments about the more standard aspects of village life: childhood and school, church and chapel, transport, industry, agriculture, work, leisure, the Second World War, and post-war change. Here there is some useful information on dialect words, on the rowdiness of early twentieth-century village life, and on the type of people who finally broke through the control of the gentry in local government in the middle of the century. But overall there is just too little information here to allow the reader to really get to grips with the differences between these three places and what that meant to those who live there.

Perhaps the weakness of this book arises from the very fact that it is a static publication. If the information presented here was used as the core of a website that could then continue to grow and develop with further comments and debates, then some of the deeper questions about community identity posed in the title may be addressed.

Steph Mastoris

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There can be a tendency to assume that the traditional style of decorating canal boats is all about ‘Roses and Castles’. This particular style developed on the narrow boats of the English Midlands, and has been very thoroughly recorded and analysed by Edward Paget-Tomlinson in his seminal work, *Colours of the Cut*. However, even for narrow boats, Paget-Tomlinson shows that ‘Roses and Castles’ were by no means universal, especially so in north-west England. Here, boats trading on the Shropshire Union, Trent and Mersey and Bridgewater canals had a different style of painting to that to be found on narrow boats in the Midlands. And, within the Midlands, there could be variations: day boats on the Birmingham canal network tended to use geometric patterns quite extensively.

The authors of *Brightwork* — the name given to decoration on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal’s traditional broad-beam carrying boats — present a cogent argument in favour of their view that the boats on this particular canal ‘were the best decorated of any, whether canal or sea-going. Arguably they were superior to those of their colleagues on England’s narrow canals, as well as those from the Tagus estuary or the salty coastal lagoons of Portugal’. What is surprising, perhaps, is that the last of the painters of ‘brightwork’ on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal ceased work as recently as the early 1960s; and what is equally pleasing is that the last painter, Sam Yates, is one of the joint authors of this excellent book.

What did the ‘brightwork’ consist of? On the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, the thirty or so boatyards along its banks developed a technique which was ‘typified by geometric patterns, intricate borders and edgings, scrollwork and colourful scenes or floral decoration [. . .] a finish of high quality’, with detailed work often done by the yard owner himself, while his skilled workers did the basic ground work. Designs were ‘handed down from generation to generation,
with each boat yard having its own recognisable style within the boundaries of the tradition’. It is asserted that Lancashire boats developed their own individual style, whereas those based and maintained in Yorkshire shared similarities with those working on and around the Humber estuary. The authors argue that the style of painting reflected the differences between Lancashire and Yorkshire folk, with the latter tending to ‘revel in a dour, parsimonious outlook’ where money was not spent unnecessarily. Lancashire folk, though, ‘were more innovative’, and it is suggested that many of the new colours developed in East Lancashire for the textile trades encouraged a more colourful nature of decoration on Lancashire-built boats.

Wherever the boats were built and maintained, it was the square transom (or stern) which provided the opportunity to display the painters’ skill and imagination. Here, as well as the boat’s name and the owner’s name, several oval or rectangular panels could contain scrolled patterns, still-life portraits, animals, landscapes, and bunches of flowers or fruit. Brightwork compares the origins of some of these features with practice across Europe, finding several similarities with the extravagant boat decoration to be found on the moliceiros, frigates, and botes of Portugal. Sam Yates has added a fascinating description of how he, as an apprentice, was taught basic painting techniques at Hodson’s Boatyard near Blackburn. This is a carefully-researched, well-illustrated and nicely-presented addition to the body of knowledge about canal-boat painting techniques, which demonstrates very clearly the links which can exist between local custom and that much further afield.

Dafydd Roberts


This slim book (as its straightforward title specifies) provides a useful and precise account of the history and technical development of British mousetraps from the late nineteenth century up to the present day. The author, retired zoologist, David Drummond, enhances its value by an expert presentation of factual information relating to his subject area and by his generous choice of photographs illustrating the diversity of mousetraps available over the modern period. The results of thorough research and study are evident and the book also includes reproductions of old trade catalogue pictures, advertisements, and sketches of various patented and unpatented designs of mousetraps. Where known, the names of individual inventors and trap makers are given. Several early makers were rural carpenters or came from the ironmongery trade and wirework manufacture. The final chapter of the book illustrates modern imported (mostly American) and foreign-origin mousetraps. Modern traps are now usually made from metal and plastic.

This book will be welcomed by collectors of ‘unconsidered’ bygones and by museum professionals who wish accurately to identify and to date puzzling mousetraps in their collections. Furthermore, the book is an acknowledgement to the historical and cultural importance of small things forgotten. The human problem of mice as vermin is a familiar one and historical references to purpose-made pottery mousetraps go back to antiquity. However, the few surviving examples of early wooden British mousetraps date from the second half of the nineteenth century and they include a diversity of ingenious and lethal designs. By the end of the century, manufacturers’ choice of trade names for their lowly products often reflect these characteristics. Both bombastic and ordinary product titles, such as Excelsior, Perpetual, and Sentry, merit a mention.

Later developments saw the emergence of successful mass factory and workshop production of mousetraps. By the late twentieth century, several improved models of ‘humane’ mousetraps were designed not to destroy the victim, but to preserve it for a later safe release.
Finally, no doubt many readers can tell of their own unexpected encounter with a mouse (or mice), either at home or elsewhere. Past and present, such small creatures have at times enjoyed starring roles, from ancient fables through to our modern popular culture. The colour illustration on the back cover of the book is of The Little Nipper cartoon by the early twentieth-century English cartoonist and illustrator, W. Heath Robinson, and is a fun reminder of this aspect of culture. In this picture, at least, no domestic contraption, however ingenious, has any real chance of catching the Timorous little beastie.

Fionnuala Carragher