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MARGARET MURRAY: WHO *DIDN'T* BELIEVE HER, AND
WHY?

ABSTRACT

Folkloristics in Britain passed through a period of intellectual torpor in the mid-twentieth century, particularly during the ascendancy within the Folklore Society (FLS) of Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner. That it emerged relatively healthy is testament both to the better scholars who led its intellectual renaissance and to those who followed, people like Professor Jacqueline Simpson. The scars remain raw, however, and those triumphant scholars like Simpson, who have contributed to our disciplinary historiography, have been understandably short in their treatment of earlier trends. All broad historical summaries can erode nuance, and examination of some minor disagreements around one of Murray's Presidential Addresses shows the ground on which the seeds of intellectual renaissance were cast. This article, originally written as a 90th birthday tribute to Simpson, examines the disagreement there and at subsequent public FLS lectures to flesh out more detail of the historical development and to enable a better understanding of later historiographical accounts of it.

Professor Jacqueline Simpson is rightly celebrated as one of the most important guiding figures of British folkloristics over the last seven decades. Sometime (1993–1996) President of the Folklore Soci-

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ety (FLS) and editor of its journal *Folklore* and its *FLS Newsletter*, she has been a continued and powerful intellectual presence, indefatigable and good-humored in her fight for the highest standards of scholarship and the encouragement of emerging scholars. Simpson's efforts have been rooted in a powerful assessment of the history of the discipline, including the part she has lived through, in works both formal (e.g., Simpson 1994) and charmingly personal (Simpson 1992). For younger folklorists, Jacqueline's reminiscences have been invaluable—theoretically informed but bringing out the personal and social interactions that embodied the discipline's development. It is impossible to separate her discussion of the encouragement shown to younger scholars by her forebears from her own active efforts in that area. Earning Jacqueline's distinctive appreciative laugh during an early conference paper was a cherished moment in my own development. Her support has never been artificial or feigned: I have heard other scholars rewarded with her equally forceful snort of derision from the conference floor for their willfully misplaced thinking.

Given her widespread appreciation in the discipline, it had been hoped to celebrate Jacqueline's 90th birthday in 2020 publicly, but COVID lockdown conditions made this impossible. Instead, a rather informal collection of papers, greetings, and gifts—including an earlier version of this paper—was delivered to her home. This paper has been reworked for publication, but I hope (and thank the *TFH* reviewer who encouraged this endeavor) that it still shows the discursive joy and gratitude that prompted it.

Every discipline has ebbs and flows, periods of relative success and decline. The 1950s marked a low point for folklore studies in Britain, with the discipline itself hanging in the balance. One can now present the discipline's history in this way largely because a counter-wave of excellent scholarship emerged to overcome that intellectual torpor, but this flags certain problems in disciplinary historiography. The glee expressed in a disciplinary history, especially by a participant in the successful vanquishing of the retrograde and unhelpful, may offer an accurate enough shorthand summary of a period and its actors at the expense of nuance. Where easy villains emerge from a narrative—perhaps fairly—it can be tempting to draw in too broad strokes. One can get it right without quite getting it all. One can lose sight of the fact that scholarship is a process, not just

a sequence of turning points. Ironically, as a result, one may only be consolidating the iconic status of the vanquished, while also doing a disservice to those who, without leading the pushback, still had partial or unformed disagreements that informed it.

Our ability to make sense of the difficult times of British folklore in the 1950s owes much to Jacqueline Simpson. She has written engagingly, passionately, and unforgivingly about the period that formed the backdrop to her own entry into British folkloristics, giving her readers a clear sense of the intellectual trajectories, heroes and villains, and (above all) the sensitivities involved. Her distinctive voice is recognizable in joint-authored coverage of the same period, often expressed in succinct summaries so pithily quotable they risk skewing closer reading. The remark that “Folklore study in England gradually gathered a negative reputation for unsound reasoning, lack of intellectual rigour, ahistorical assumptions, and general pottiness” rings with Simpson’s voice, never fails to make me laugh, is a true enough survey of the discipline’s broad tendencies, and yet still might not be entirely helpful if one wants to examine English folkloristics more closely (Simpson and Roud 2000, 129).

Simpson has been unflinching in linking the decline of folklore scholarship in Britain during this period with the ascendancy in the FLS of two specific people: Margaret Murray and Gerald B. Gardner. Murray and Gardner are extremely complex historical figures, and Simpson’s writings remain essential for negotiating one’s way through the period of their dominance. Simpson’s writings clearly also form part of her own negotiation through that period. I am not disagreeing with the broad sweep of Simpson’s argument, as I have indicated in recent articles (Cowdell 2019; 2021a). It does, though, require some nuance to gain a fuller appreciation of Murray, Gardner, and those who joined the FLS under their influence. This is also necessary to gain a better understanding of those (like Simpson herself) who were not devotees of Murray and Gardner but joined the FLS when it still very much bore their stamp. Although Murray and Gardner may have sometimes behaved like it, they are not usefully cast as pantomime villains, even when the results of their influence had a markedly pantomimic character. The title of this article is a teasing provocation, yes, but its comment on Simpson’s title (Simpson 1994) is an appeal for further nuance.

THE FLS UP TO THE 1960s

When Jacqueline Simpson joined the FLS, membership was still granted through the approval of an application. Her application was accepted in 1964, the year after Murray's death. One of the best young scholars entering an FLS already shaking off its torpor, Simpson was guided and inspired by (and aligned with) the scholars who had begun that delineation over the previous decade, but the FLS still displayed Murray's influence. Despite the thorough academic debunking and dismantling of her folklore writing (a process which began almost as soon as she started writing on witchcraft in 1921), Murray to this day retains a surprisingly high public profile.

At the time, the FLS held a regular series of public lectures, reflecting not just the breadth of current folklore research, but also to some extent the Society's internal preoccupations and discussions. The reorientation of the FLS on sounder scholarly lines was well under way when Simpson joined, led by younger scholars like Iona and Peter Opie and Hilda Ellis Davidson. These scholars provided attractive perspectives not just to the newcomers who would shape the future FLS, but also to the more serious older scholars, notwithstanding whatever theoretical background they shared with Murray. This disciplinary reorientation, therefore, had a public character, and the first FLS public lecture Simpson attended on February 19, 1964 (discussed below) should be seen as part of that scholarly reevaluation of the ideas that had until recently dominated the Society's life. (Simpson gave her own first FLS lecture 18 months later).

That 1964 lecture, Rossell Hope Robbins's "The Synthetic Sabbath," was a critical demolition of Murray's views on the history and persistence of witchcraft as "a secret society of fertility cultists" and was correspondingly high profile. Press reports of FLS lectures were syndicated nationally, ensuring widespread awareness of the Society's discussion. This lecture also occasioned a determined rearguard action from the witchcraft loyalists. Simpson recorded the presence of (and occasional squawk from) Hotfoot Jackson, a tame jackdaw perched on the shoulder of Sybil Leek, High Priestess of the New Forest Coven closely associated with Gardner. Simpson's characteristic amusement remained to the fore as she "noted with dismay that

female scholars and witches can look rather alike, both tending to dramatic jewellery and hats” (Simpson 1992). Some of my female folklorist contemporaries have delighted in the continued accuracy of this observation, which was perhaps also informed by Simpson’s own sartorial preferences and style.

I do not propose here to review the biographies of Gardner or Murray in detail; I have given thumbnail sketches elsewhere (Cowdell 2019, 309–10; 2021a, 193–95), and would refer readers more generally to invaluable work by Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood (1998), Jacqueline Simpson (1992, 1994), and the relevant entries in Simpson and Roud (2000). It is sufficient to note two things. From the very start (1921), the Egyptologist Murray’s writings on witchcraft had been critically attacked, but they retained prominence and authority for popular readers. It should also be noted that the “flamboyant and sinister” Gardner (Davidson 1987, 124) was already active on the FLS Council when Murray was elected the Society’s President in 1953. Gardner used Murray’s writings to legitimize his new religion of witchcraft/Wicca, although Murray seems not to have identified with that movement. Hilda Ellis Davidson, another representative of that new wave of British folklore scholarship that successfully pulled the FLS back from the intellectual brink, wrote later that “It is, in retrospect, difficult to see how Dr Gardner ever got on to the [Society’s] Council, but possibly it was after his arrival that people became so cautious” (Davidson 1987, 124). Davidson was writing with the hindsight of success, but her comment should indicate again the ways in which intellectual disputes unfold as processes.

The combination of Murray and Gardner must have made the FLS extremely appealing for many whose views of folklore were far from being scholarly, academic, or even up to date. Much of the inspiration for Murray’s speculative turn to folklore in the first place had been driven by her reading of J.G. Frazer. Frazer had also been subject to critical attention from serious folklorists, even during his ascendancy, and became increasingly discredited or disowned within academic folklore over the course of Murray’s long career. By calculated design, however, he remained—and remains—hugely (and, to these eyes, bafflingly) attractive to a popular readership (Beard 1992; Cowdell 2019). With the abridgement of *The Golden Bough*, above all, Frazer deliberately and successfully turned towards a pop-

ular readership. Murray, following the academic criticisms of her first publication on witchcraft, made a similar popular turn. Gardner was writing as an inventive practitioner, and therefore addressing potential new recruits if not seeking mass audiences.

Their undoubted popular appeal certainly brought many into the FLS. The active and striking Gardner was a proselytizing ambassador for his new religion. Murray was established as an *eminence grise*, the authority figure for that religious movement, granted further influence by her seniority. She turned 90 the year she was elected FLS President, and in its magnanimous generosity the FLS gifted her honorary life membership of the Society on her 100th birthday. She had begun a deliberate policy of disregarding complicating or critical evidence and arguments quite early in her work on witchcraft. By the 1950s, she engaged less and less with disputes over that work, now taken as authoritative by the new religious practitioners. Her aloofness from the debate regarding her own pronouncements, even as she continued to lecture and make new observations on witchcraft and on folklore more generally, lent her only a greater silent weight that would raise her status even further among acolytes (including those drawn to the FLS because of her). This may have encouraged a rather uncritical respect for her as an individual, even if it also led to a speedy dismantling of her authority after her death. There were certainly nuanced disagreements with her during her lifetime (which she ignored), but her posthumous reputation among a wider popular readership may also not be what it is among folklorists and other scholars. A circular argument among practitioners allows for criticism of such figures while also suggesting that their vilification was driven by more than scholarly considerations (the argument that although they may have been wrong on some counts, their denunciation points to them having been onto *something* after all). Folkloristic vanquishing of Murray has not eliminated her popular status but instead may have cemented her place in legend and conspiracy theory more securely.

It is not just that the specific omissions and errors of fact in Murray's scholarship that have been disputed and rejected by subsequent scholars continue to be recycled and reincorporated at a popular level. The badly applied and misappropriated Romanticism that fueled Murray's misplaced speculation masquerading as scholarship continues to bedevil the discipline (it is bad Romanticism fueling bad schol-

arship). This takes particular forms in Britain, where folklore still has relatively little academic presence (although this is happily changing). The essays in Cheeseman and Hart (2021) provide a useful overview of the related concerns for British folklorists. The concerns arise with especial acuteness in an area to which Jacqueline Simpson has contributed greatly: local folklore. Archaeologists are currently waging their own high-profile struggle against this tendency (see, for example, Hoopes, Dibble, and Feagans 2023), but the two struggles are explicitly connected in Britain, as Tina Paphitis—greatly influenced by Simpson’s work on folklore and place—has examined (Paphitis 2013, 2020). Paphitis co-organized three successful FLS “Popular Antiquities” conferences at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Simpson supported the series enthusiastically, attending all three and presenting at one.

Belief scholars must also negotiate the deliberate and inventive use of speculative material in the bricolage of new religious movements. Those scholars who lived and fought through the deliberately retrograde scholarship fostered by Murray in particular could be occasionally intemperate towards it, after having created the suitable intellectual conditions for younger scholars to be rigorous but more nuanced in their own appraisal of the phenomenon. The late W.F. (Will) Ryan, one of Simpson’s successors as FLS President (2005–2008), reported with amusement that he had been removed from an internet discussion group run by belief scholars for some remarks considered curt and disrespectful, for example.

Consider, then, how much more intense the argument must have felt in 1964 for scholars tackling the ongoing, decades-long intellectual decline of the FLS. Syndicated press coverage of Robbins’s lecture drew national attention, and his lecture was well attended, with new FLS member Simpson and a young Angela Carter (actively involved in folk song clubs at the time) among the many visitors. Arriving at the lecture hall, Simpson found “a pile of broomsticks in the corridor,” although she suspected these were a satirical gesture by students rather than the witches’ conveyance. She describes a lively question session after the lecture, in which Robbins continued to demolish Murray’s claims and arguments:

Angrily, the witches asked how Dr Robbins could explain the close

likeness between what they did and believed and what Dr Murray had described in her books. Simple, said he, modern witches had cribbed all their ideas from these very books, which had been around for forty years, and from later ones by Robert Graves and Gerald Gardner. None of these were historically sound. It must have been bitter for the witches to hear all this; not only was their cherished self-image being denied, but Margaret Murray was being criticised by the very Society where she had been President ... Probably the FLS Committee were feeling equally tense – dreading bad publicity and striving to make clear their academic standards. (Simpson 1992)

It is a great pity that the FLS never published Robbins's lecture. This might have accelerated the slow acceptance of his astute and correct comments on Murray as the source for contemporary witchcraft practice, which took a long time to become orthodoxy (Heselton 2003, 385). Perhaps, despite the FLS's evident determination to clear the intellectual decks, there was simply too much anxiety about what was involved. Simpson reports that Peter Opie, another of that brilliant generation who revived serious folklore study in Britain, was "the luckless Chairman, sat with his head in his hands, speechless" (1992). However taxing for those effecting it, this was an important step towards the more robust theoretical appreciation that gained ground through their efforts. Only six years later, on February 18, 1970, Geoffrey Parrinder's FLS lecture on witchcraft "referred to Margaret Murray's theory that witchcraft represents the survival of an ancient pagan cult, and pointed out that it was based on insufficient evidence" (FLS Minute Books Feb. 18, 1970). The discussion was still "lively," but it was not open warfare.

Contemporaries noted that Murray had no particular concern for—or interest in—this adaptive application of her thinking in new religious practices, but her continued public comment as an authority on the subject required her supporters to do that work for themselves. In 1945, Murray connected the recent murder of Charles Walton at Lower Quinton in Warwickshire with the discovery of a woman's skeleton inside a wych elm in Hagley Wood, Worcestershire two years earlier. The unidentified woman had been dead around 18 months, and 1944 graffiti asking "Who put Bella in the Wych Elm?" gave her an enduring name in legendry. Walton's throat had been cut

with a billhook, and his corpse was pinned to the ground with a pitchfork (Cowdell 2019, 312–314 on Lower Quinton; 2021a, 198–200 on Hagley Wood). Drawing comparisons with Walton’s murder, Murray suggested in an interview that the wych elm corpse was possible evidence of a ritual magical killing. This was awkward for the increasing number of those interested in the occult and witchcraft, and it was left to Gardner (2004 [1959], 196) to make a careful argument *against* the connection. Gardner sought to protect practitioners against absurd and lurid claims without abandoning Murray’s underlying thesis; it was a dispute about the application of interpretation, not the interpretation itself. Gardner’s surprisingly sensible comments on this bear revisiting.

Yet this is the important thing for folklorists studying the discipline’s history to grasp. One might sketch out the big picture, but that will always contain small, gritty details that give it depth without necessarily contradicting that bigger picture. It is correct enough to point to a prevailing Murray/Gardner tendency, but even those without an axe to grind against them did not necessarily agree with everything they said—the ensuing reorientation triumphantly embodied by Jacqueline Simpson would not have been possible otherwise.

MURRAY’S 1954 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Consider, for example, Murray’s 1954 Presidential Address, “England as a Field for Folklore Research” (1954). It is an often odd lecture, combining sound advice on documentation—although her correct observation in the lecture that “the two qualifications required in a collector of folklore are accuracy and honesty” (Murray 1954, 9) may sound unconvincing coming from someone criticized for “ruthlessly ignor[ing] in her sources anything which did not support her case” (Hutton 1999, 196)—with an evident ignorance of the actual documentation of folklore in England that was already ongoing. Murray cannot, perhaps, be held solely responsible here, as she was echoing the concerns of two of her post-war Presidential predecessors, Lord Raglan (1945–1947) and Allan Gomme (1951–1953). Their Presidential Addresses were directly focused on perceived shortcomings in this area—historical background—and proposed practical responses

to overcome its deficiencies.

Even within this framework, however, their Addresses reflected the shortcomings that they were trying to overcome. This is hardly unexpected, of course, but as Dan Ben-Amos (1998) notes, Raglan's 1964 address in particular contained parochial and historical limitations. Raglan's appeal for a turn to include dialect came almost a century after the new word "folklore" appeared in a book title for the first time: Thomas Sternberg's *Folklore and Dialect of Northamptonshire*. Ben-Amos's criticism is correct, but he is not quite sympathetically sensitive to the attempt, on even such a limited and parochial level, to address a problem which the FLS itself embodied. The post-war travails of the FLS are a relatively minor part of Ben-Amos's considerations—by way of comparison with the contemporaneous situation for folklore in America—so he does not contextualize his remarks with any reflection on the more significant fact that many British contemporaries were also weighing in on these questions. Even if not directly tackling the theoretical basis for the situation in which they found themselves, these post-war presidential lectures did attempt to engage critically with the result, in however limited a way.

Despite these limitations, Gomme and Murray were attempting to think about the problems Raglan had highlighted, as did Gomme's eventual successor Sona Rosa Burstein, rather differently, using her three Presidential Addresses to reorient the FLS historically to its theoretical pioneers. (When T.W. Bagshawe resigned abruptly in 1955, only months into his presidency, the Society's governing bodies decided to proceed without a President rather than rushing to appoint a replacement; the following year, Burstein was encouraged to take formally the position whose functions she had been fulfilling in the meantime, and the sanity of her attempts at intellectual reorientation confirm the wisdom of the move). The folklorists now identified as belonging with the future of the FLS rather than its past or its becalmed present were also getting involved at this time, shaping a turn in British folkloristics. Peter Opie's direct response to Raglan's challenges, outlining a newer shift in consideration and collection of folklore, took its title from a phrase in Murray's Address: "England, the Great Undiscovered" (1954). The Opies, with their rigorous fieldwork, their urban collection, and their attentiveness to newer lore, were representative of the younger folklorists who would reinvigo-

rate the discipline in Britain (and the FLS specifically), break it free of the doldrums in which it was drifting, and prove a magnet for scholars of Simpson's quality.

However, that those representatives of the future were joining the debate was facilitated, in part, by the fact that they were not the only ones making critical noises. Recognizing intellectual stagnation says less about the quantity of activity or discussion than it does about its content. As a representative example, one can look at one comment in Murray's presidential address that attracted considerable attention. Given that Britain generally, and England specifically, has such a long-established reputation for ghostliness, it is striking to read Murray assert baldly that, like belief in the devil, "belief in ghosts is also dying out." This she attributes largely to technological developments, above all electric lighting (a familiar trope in ghost legendry internationally): "Ghosts are notoriously fond of darkness, but now every town and most villages have street lamps, houses are lighted by electricity, vehicles have head-lamps which illuminate the darkest lane..." Her argument is an encouragement to base field collection on the old salvage ethnology approach to folklore: "belief in those entities were, and still are, in many places part of the background of the life of those believers. As the belief dies out, the stories and traditions will die also, so now is the time to record them." The distinction should be drawn between legends and the experiential memorates that can support them, but Murray's argument is that a decline in the latter would inevitably result in a decline in the former.

This conclusion is not supported by other research, including the local legend material meticulously assembled by Simpson and Jennifer Westwood (2008). Simpson has also made perceptive contributions on the belief positions of folklore researchers in this field, concluding that "insofar as one is conducting folkloric research on beliefs and memorates, one is ipso facto taking up a non-believing position" (pers. corr. Apr. 7, 2008). This has implications for the chain of legend transmission, especially the place of folklorists within this phenomenon, which is considered further below. Such generous correspondence exemplifies her supportive encouragement of younger scholars, and her corroborating statement about the non-believing position is typically brilliant and good humored: "If I **believed** there are fairies at Findhorn, or a grieving ghost in Castle X, or a

dragon in the Knucker Hole [Lyminster, Sussex], I'd surely go off and ***do*** something about it—try to photograph the fairies, arrange for requiems for the ghost, join the Psychical Research Society, run like hell from the dragon..." (pers. corr. Apr. 7, 2008).

In light of this, and given Murray's personal distance from Gardner's religious movement, it is worth noting a passing remark in Murray's Address contrasting witchcraft belief and belief in the devil, which seems predicated on a similar reading of the relationship between experience, belief, and narrative. (Simpson's discussion of the belief attitudes of folklore researchers was informed by her own religious beliefs). "[B]elief in the devil is dying out," Murray argues, "due to a change in religious thought." She means by this a shift in theological readings of sin from the temptations of the devil (followed by punishment "due to the wrath of God") to a simpler cause-and-effect mechanism, coupled with a psychological revelation of mental working that showed "the real cause of sin" to be "want of self-control." She notes as "a curious fact," however, that this was the case "though the belief in witches and their power is rampant." This reads less as implied criticism of Gardner's observants than as a slightly baffled acknowledgement of a situation without implicating herself in it at all, even though it could also be used to argue for her historical correctness on witchcraft's survival (Murray 1954, 7).

ALASDAIR ALPIN MACGREGOR'S RESPONSE

Reading reports of lectures at historical distance can leave one viewing them solely in textual terms, tracing the threads of argument chiefly through congruence and date. Murray's 1954 comments are clearly connected to earlier presidential pronouncements, and Opie made explicit that his article later that year was a response to Murray's Address; this is invaluable, of course, but there is more. In normal times—outside of health lockdowns, say—public lectures are attended by actual audiences, who respond in person to what they hear. For all that the FLS was trading water intellectually during this period, its public status was still somewhat higher than it is today. Lectures by a prominent figure like Murray, especially when touching on popular subjects like ghosts, were reported in syndicated

press notes that were discussed widely. Robbins's 1964 lecture demolishing Murray was also widely reported, and the FLS must have been relieved that the extensive coverage was "reasonably balanced" (Simpson 1992). Tracing syndicated publication in local papers might be interesting, although possibly fruitless: the original printing would simply be a press agency summary of the lecture, and any real interest would come from subsequent reactions in letters or comment articles.

We are lucky, therefore, that at least one member of the audience for Murray's 1954 Address commented in print, noting how the press reported Murray's remarks. The Scottish writer Alasdair Alpin MacGregor was an enthusiastic member of the FLS who participated actively in lecture meetings. Although a prolific professional writer, with the National Library of Scotland listing some 42 titles written or edited by him in its main catalogue, he contributed only two short pieces to *Folklore*: a note on an itinerant Irish rat-man and a comment on E.I. Begg's collection of Highland folklore. He wrote professionally on a wide range of subjects. His travel writings, mainly on the Highlands and Islands, show a great interest in local life and beliefs. In this field he was known chiefly for his writing on ghosts, often incorporating discursive travelogues with lengthy geographical descriptions and local history before the ghost narratives proper. He contributed articles on this subject to several periodicals, and at the time of Murray's Address was working on his *Ghost Book*, published a year later. The disputing of legend is an important part of the negotiation around all supernatural narratives, and MacGregor's comments are a fascinating example of this unfolding both in person and in print. Although MacGregor is not one of the figures around whom the revitalizing of the FLS took place, either personally or theoretically, his comments shed some light on the inner life of the FLS then, which served as both context for and contribution to that change.

The significance of Murray's discussion to MacGregor can be gauged by his decision to use it as the opening of his *Ghost Book*. The book's first words are Murray's: "Belief in ghosts, like belief in the devil, is dying out" (MacGregor 1955, xi-xii for the following). As is often the case with ghost narratives, MacGregor's response is framed around the authority and expertise of the speaker, but (as is also often the case) this does not so much imply simple agreement and definitive solutions as it allows serious and informed context for consideration

and contemplation. He emphasizes both Murray's expertise and a lack of any personal animosity, describing her as "that extremely learned friend of mine" and humbly comparing their positions a paragraph later: "If one so vastly knowledgeable as Margaret Murray felt called upon to make so authoritative a pronouncement before an audience so distinguished, and in a setting so academic, how was *I* to justify myself when I arrived on my publisher's threshold with the typescript of the present work?"

Ghosts, however, allow for disagreement and dispute without challenging such authority. FLS members seemed disinclined to accept Murray's argument about the decline of ghost belief. MacGregor reports that Murray's comment elicited "An audible sigh of respectful disagreement... along our benches at University College." MacGregor places himself not on Murray's level, but as having some recognized knowledge in the area. He writes, "I became conscious that one or two members, aware of my own mild preoccupation with matters ghostly, were glancing in my direction to see my reaction at this devastating declaration." Indeed, he admits that he "may have sighed a little disapproval" himself, although he claims this had more to do with him "momentarily entertain[ing] misgivings about the prospects" of his own book. The disagreement expressed within the room at Murray's comment did not, therefore, contradict or disallow her more general authority or status as President. That legend dialectic continued to unfold once the press took up the story, particularly giving "considerable publicity" to the comment about electricity and improved lighting. Murray reiterated her thinking in an interview with the *London Evening News* a couple of days after the lecture, explaining that "If you think there is something in the room...all you have to do is put on the bedside light. Either it was all imagination, in which case the light ends one's fears, or else the ghost disappears—because no ghost is seen in the light." (This discussion, incidentally, seems revealing of Murray's own beliefs, and its formulation is usefully contrasted with Simpson's informal comment cited above).

MacGregor followed the dispute as it unfolded publicly, mentioning in the process the reputation for ghostliness already noted, although the Scot MacGregor's description of "this ghost-haunted country of ours" covers all of Britain rather than the England of Murray's original purview. The first voice launched publicly against

Murray's declaration came from another Scot, Mary Balfour. As is frequently the case with ghostlore, the dispute hinges around experience as much as authority. The London-based Balfour sent "broadcast from Fleet Street" a clear statement that she had seen ghosts "in all lights...If a ghost be there, light does not matter, so long as one has the faculty of 'seeing.'" Her personal authority and experience came, she wrote, from being a Highlander, and "the seventh child of a seventh child." This criterion was much invoked within the FLS during this period, pointing again to the complicated untangling of *outré* folkloristics over the period; it was most famously claimed of herself, falsely, by Ruth Tongue. Tongue can be seen as the sort of element encouraged by the poorer folkloristics of an earlier period, but whose contributions to the field were improved by working under the guidance of the newer, better scholars (Katharine Briggs, in Tongue's own case). The seventh child criterion, however, has longer provenance within folkloric discussions of ghosts and persists today. I have heard the claim from an informant in an interview, and one popular medium emphasized it for his own authority by subtitling his autobiography *The Remarkable Story of a Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (Smith 2003). MacGregor lined up with his "gifted" friend, writing "I think I'm on Mary Balfour's side in all this: I see no reason for supposing that Britain's ghost population has dwindled to a mere shade of its former self."

MacGregor is not strident, but he has no need to be. As a seventh child of a seventh child, Balfour has sufficient folkloric authority to back up her forthright statement. MacGregor supports her, however, with another voice, anonymous but blunter. A Midlands reader of MacGregor's ghost articles "in various periodicals" sent him a postcard on which had been pasted a local newspaper cutting of Murray's remarks. At the bottom, "in a firm and determined hand," were just "two telling, if not also encouraging, words—'UTTER ROT!'" (The tone is appealingly Simpsonsque).

One should not make exaggerated claims for these rejections of a barely supportable comment from Murray. They were not a vanguard challenge to Murray's authority overall, and such dismissals are perfectly consonant with the ways in which ghost narratives are disputed and considered. Even hostile or critical opinions like Murray's, if expressed seriously, may trigger a response. Such responses may not

themselves be literary or polished narratives or arguments (as with the Midlands correspondent) but do then become available for incorporation into published discussions like MacGregor's. Moving from reactions to Murray's comment into a more general introduction, MacGregor comments that "Ghost stories, as a rule, suffer from their seldom being firsthand" but are told as a chain of reported stories (MacGregor 1955, xiii). In part, he is trying to acknowledge the problem caused by an amalgamation of older and newer material while simultaneously presenting a collection of stories appearing mostly for the first time, but he may also have been downplaying his own role in the dissemination of these narratives. When he insists that he is trying "to *relate*, rather than to *explain*" (xiv, his emphasis), he is clearly shaping himself as a contributor to the circulation and assessment of narratives. His comment in this regard fits perfectly with the consideration of the chain of transmission of stories outlined by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vaszonyi. Importantly, and usefully, they explicitly include the folklore scholar as a direct link in that chain (Cowdell 2006 [2010]; Dégh and Vaszonyi 1974). Scholarly argument and dispute are also shaped by folklorically accepted narrative patterns. My own writing on Violet Alford benefited immeasurably from Simpson's discussion of her presentation style as well as her content.

CONCLUSION

My teasing title may have misleadingly hinted at some articulated anti-Murray Resistance movement. That is clearly not what was happening with MacGregor's comments, nor with those of Balfour and the splenetic Midlander. Rather, as I have suggested, the legend dialectic of ghost narratives allows the possibility of disagreement without undermining the status of the authority figure. This disagreement with Murray is predicated on her authority, and thus served to reinforce it. Although that authority has been subsequently dismantled, the existence of the disagreement on such terms allows for Murray's authority to be continued, if required, even in the contested terms of legendry. To ask critical questions in a folklore genre that allows them also creates the chance for critical questioning to develop more broadly in folklore scholarship as well as in the folklore it is studying.

Perhaps we should listen more to the passing critical noises made by folklorists who were not necessarily hostile or even opposed to Murray, reading them as part and parcel of the broader development of the discipline that allowed it to survive those difficult years.

The sociable and gregarious Violet Alford, for example, shared many influences with Murray, above all Frazer. Alford's fieldwork had long satisfied the criteria Murray laid out in her 1954 Address (alongside encouraging new waves of fieldworkers), but it also provided her reasons for not being able to accept some of Murray's claims. She used her critique, however, to finesse and support Murray's broader thesis, not reject it: Alford and Rodney Gallop accepted Murray's claim that a Dianic cult in Western Europe had survived the introduction of Christianity, for example, but the volume of contemporary Christian involvement they saw in fieldwork left them unable to agree with Murray's claim it was "entirely in the hands of the so-called witch communities" (Alford and Gallop 1935). Alford, as I discuss elsewhere (Cowdell 2021b), was hardly an adversary of Murray. They broadly agreed on much, in fact, but Alford's energetic and serious fieldwork still provided a beacon for folklorists who could and would transcend the constraints of Murray's thinking. Despite her sympathies with Murray, Alford was also engaged in work that pointed forward to Simpson's generation. Pleasingly, she had a reputation for supporting younger scholars, much as Simpson would; Alford and Margaret Dean-Smith conspired in offering to ask planted questions after conference papers given by inexperienced speakers (Davidson 1987, 125). Alford was a lively speaker herself, with Simpson recalling one "passionate tirade" (Cowdell 2021b, 383).

As with MacGregor's ghost lore, Alford's minor criticisms point well beyond her own thinking and ambitions. Too much should not be drawn from this, but a suggestive letter about press misrepresentations of folklore can profitably be set alongside the press coverage discussed above. Alford had long been concerned about press misrepresentations of folklore—specific events and customs, and the conceptual understandings drawn from them—and about reasserting the authority of folklorists. The latter involved advocacy of the FLS as folklorists' senior organizing body in Britain. It marked no new departure for her in 1955 to suggest that *Folklore* publish orienting comments alongside items culled from the press to prevent confusion

and misunderstandings among, particularly, newer and less experienced members of the FLS. Her letter, however, coincided with the rising media profile of the FLS thanks to the Murrayite/Gardnerian leadership. (Gardner also had to confront the problems this created). Given her reputation for supporting younger scholars, Alford's comment does not seem pointed or underhanded, but many of the less experienced folklorists relatively new to the FLS would have been Murray admirers. Even without seeking to undermine or contradict Murray, Alford's direct engagement (whatever its limitations) with the content of her argument contributed to the possibility of that argument being later superseded.

One should not be Panglossian in reading the opportunities opened for later, better, folklore scholars by the possibilities enabled by such serious discourse: the exploitation of those possibilities was not inevitable, and failure to overcome them would have been catastrophic. This may account for (or at least contribute to) the anxious fury found in many serious historical accounts of the period, including Simpson's. One can, however, at least celebrate the fact that some of the scholars who seized on those opportunities, like Jacqueline Simpson, were able to make their own enduring contributions to the discipline and provide an invaluable historical summary to orient newer scholars. As a folklorist whose historical orientation was, and continues to be, guided by Jacqueline Simpson's thorough and brilliant work, my own fascination with the wrinkles and nuances of that history is enabled and informed by her broad sweep. I am raising an eyebrow in bemusement at Alasdair Alpin MacGregor across a lecture hall, but I am doing so with a somewhat different future understanding and engagement with the discipline in mind. For that, I raise another toast to Jacqueline.

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