
PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY LEGEND

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International Society for
Contemporary Legend Research,
26th International Conference,
Dublin, Ireland, July 7 – 9, 2008.

Contemporary legends, rumors, gossip
and other ephemeral forms of folk narratives
typical for postmodern society represent
one of the most interesting issues
of contemporary social sciences. Since
the 1980s, when these fictional narratives
told as true were “discovered” by
U.S. folklorists, their study attracted not
only specialists in folk narratives, but
also cultural anthropologists, sociologists,
literary historians, media researchers
and scholars from other disciplines.

The vanguard of the study of these narratives
has always been represented by the
International Society for Contemporary
Legend Research (ISCLR). This scientific
society, founded in 1988 in Sheffield, UK,
originated from (now almost legendary)
Sheffield theoretical and terminological
seminars organized by British folklorist
Gillian Bennett and Canadian folklorist
Paul Smith. It was the ISCLR that coined
the now standard term for these narratives
“contemporary legend” (instead of
urban legend and urban myth preferred
by media and popular culture) and it
was the ISCLR publications – the journal
Contemporary Legend and the newsletter
FOAFTale News – which are now
regarded as standard research tools for
anyone interested in contemporary oral
tradition. The most important part of the
ISCLR activity is its annual international
conferences, held in North America and
Europe. The last, 26th ISCLR conference,
titled Perspectives on Contemporary Legend,
was held in Dublin, Ireland, July 7-9,
2008, with more than twenty active participants
from the fields of folkloristics,
cultural anthropology, psychology, literary
history and media and cultural studies.

The majority of the presentations
were devoted to well-documented case
studies of actual legend traditions; the
most interesting ones were Contemporary

Legends Are Ephemeral: What Was Really Told About the Hatchet–Lady At Red Rocks, Colorado by Michael J. Preston (University of Colorado, USA), The Search for Winnie the Puma. Wild Animals in Civilized Environment by Theo Meder (Meertens Institute, The Netherlands), Japanese Ghost Lore by Gunella Thorgeirsdottir (University of Sheffield, UK) and Collecting Student Lore in Göttingen: Expectations and Results by Christine Shojaei Kawan (Enzyklopädie des Märchens, Germany). Two special sections were devoted to historical narratives; these included papers on various local guises of traditional folkloric character: Spring-heeled Jack – Unmasking Spring-heeled Jack: A Case Study of a 19th Century Ghost Panic by David Clarke (Sheffield Halam University, UK) and Urban Maniac Or Resistance Fighter? Rumours And Legends About the Spring Man by Petr Janeček (National Museum, Czech Republic), and interesting sociocultural interpretation of Soviet post-WWII cannibalism narratives in The Legend of the Sausage Factory: Post-War Images of Violence and Evil by Eda Kalmre (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia). One interesting section touched on economical exploitation of folk beliefs by mercantile corporations – e.g., the so-called Spikeys and date-rape drug test strips utilizing the false belief in drink spiking in clubs and discotheques (Crime Legends in Different Media by Peter Burger, Leiden University, The Netherlands) or sleeping gas alarms inspired by false public scare of gas attacks directed against tourist in caravans, trucks and trains (Gassed and Robbed by Sandy Hobbs and Seonaid Anderson, University of the West of Scotland, UK). The issue of deliberate utilization of folk beliefs was also touched on in other papers, the most interesting ones being Contemporary Legend: A Fundamentally Political Act by Bill Ellis (Pennsylvania State University, USA), interpreting political use of rumors in official U.S. propaganda during the Gulf and Iraq Wars, and Man Disposes, God Discloses: Legend of the Levees by Carl Lindahl (University of Houston, USA), interpreting African–American rumors about deliberate flooding of lowincome neighborhoods of New Orleans during the hurricane Katrina disaster in order to save rich “white” neighborhoods. Mechanisms of planting false

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beliefs in the media and wider cultural

systems were subjects of other interesting papers – What Else is Black, White and Read All Over: Legends That Sounds Like News in a journalistic interpretation of Russell Frank (Pennsylvania State University, USA) and an anthropological interpretation in Contemporary Legend and Cultural Proscriptions by Mark Glazer (The University of Texas–Pan American, USA). In comparison with earlier conferences, there was a slight shortage of purely psychological papers, one interesting exemption being Classifying Contemporary Legend By Their Psychological Function: A New Look by David Main (University of West of Scotland, UK). The twenty-sixth international conference of the ISCLR showed again that investigation of contemporary legend is far from the scientific fad typical of the 1980s and 1990s, but still attracts more international scholars from various fields, most notably anthropology and media studies, and from a still-growing number of countries (represented not only by “traditional” English-speaking countries, but also Western European countries like Germany or the Netherlands and Eastern European countries like the Czech Republic and Estonia). Let us hope that the next conference held in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2009, will present similarly interesting issues and topics.

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