

III. Forschungs- und Tagungsberichte

Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich/
Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, Wellington

Traditions & Transitions Folk Narratives in the Contemporary World 13th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR)

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At the 12th congress of the ISFNR held in Göttingen 1998, the majority of the members of the General Assembly voted in favour of Melbourne as the venue for the next congress, following Susan Fayne's friendly presentation of the Australian city and the offer by the Victorian Folklife Association to organise the occasion. The Call for Papers issued early in 2000 listed, under the main title *Traditions & Transitions*, a large variety of topics to be dealt with: I. *Rediscovered histories*, II. *The colonised and the colonisers*, III. *Dislocation and belonging*, IV. *Tales, tellers and textualisation*, V. *Generation and regeneration: folk narrative by and about children*, VI. *The fantastic and the mythologised*, VII. *Fertile environments: a critical evaluation*.

Upon our arrival in Melbourne, probably not surprisingly, we found that it was – due to the long distance from almost everywhere else in the world – a comparatively small conference, with some 180 participants and 150 papers on the schedule. The members from Europe and America, the stronghold of the former ISFNR conferences, were mostly absent, even those who had favoured Melbourne instead of Helsinki at the Göttingen conference. The new president of the ISFNR, Galit Hasan-Rokem (Jerusalem), could welcome a large delegation from her own country, the staff of the Göttingen *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* was also there, and a number of other participants came from different parts of Europe and the Americas; but the majority of participants came from African and Asian countries, and of course from Australia and the Pacific.

That is exactly what the organisers wanted to achieve by the conference: to act as a focus for folklorists in the Asia-Pacific region, to provide new academic audiences for them, and to boost the credibility and status of folklore as a discipline and as a cultural category in that part of the world. In contrast to high expectation of new public audiences, however, the congress held in the

heart of Melbourne University did not find - with the exception of the opening ceremony - much public interest. We did not come across any newspaper, radio or television report. Nevertheless, we were offered a great opportunity to discover Melbourne as one of the world's great multicultural cities, and to get in contact with a great number of participants who for the first time could attend an ISFNR congress.

The congress papers filled four days of the programme, interrupted by Wednesday, which offered four excursions to choose from. We went to Ballarat and had a great day at the Goldfield Open Air Museum and the Eureka Centre, commemorating the only martial incident on Australian soil between the miners and the local authorities at the Stockade in 1854. Other options included the suburban part of Melbourne, Brunswick and the Mount Alexander Goldfield area.

The scholarly programme of the conference was divided into six plenary sessions and 46 sections. Unfortunately the original topics and themes had disappeared from the programme, leaving us just with the titles of papers and without an overall structure for the congress as a whole. This was in fact probably the most interdisciplinary conference the ISFNR has ever had, with a wide range of papers making it sometimes difficult to find the link to folk narrative research. Of the 150 accepted papers, only 40 were presented by ISFNR members; more importantly, most of the others were by non-folklorists. The new outline given on the front page of the conference folder explained that this was "a conference exploring past and present narratives and connecting them with race, gender, cultural and social difference, language and linguistics, cultural theory and critical discourse, history, literature, religion, anthropology and ethnography".

The explanation for this change from past practice lies very much in the chosen venue for the conference itself: such connections are intellectual and (to a degree) public preoccupations in this part of the world. It was not surprising, moreover, that the conference had, because of its location, a strong emphasis on Australia, giving it a regional flavour. About 40% of the participants alone came from Australia and probably another 10% from Pacific countries such as New Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, and Samoa. And from the 150 papers, 26 were on Australian subjects and another seven on subjects related to the Pacific and Australasia; these could be seen as constituting a separate conference within the congress.

Three of the six plenary papers were by Australians on such Australian subjects as immigration, indigenous people, and Australian English. The opening lecture, presented by Raimond Gaita (Melbourne/London) and entitled *Love and Learning, Literature and Affliction*, was a philosophical account of the speaker's childhood, and the immigration history and the fate of his parents, accompanied by theoretical reflections on the concept of love. The second plenary paper by Doreen Mellor was an account of an Oral history project entitled *Collective Memory, Divergent Histories: the National Library of Australia's "Bringing them home" history project on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres*

Strait Islander Children from their families. The last plenary paper was a lively and entertaining presentation by Kate Burridge on *Australian English as an Icon of Australian Culture*. Although presented from a linguistic point of view, leaving out the narrative background one might expect, it deepened the briefing on Australia's cultural history which we were receiving.

Apart from these Australian plenary papers we could listen to Cristina Bacchilega's presentation of *Spectres and the Politics of Place*, an account of the connection between contemporary legends and certain places in the Hawaiian landscape, to Donald Haase's investigations into the English-language editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, and to Sharif Kanaana's report on *Half a Century of Palestinian Folk Narratives*.

Of the number of sessions which focused on a wide range of topics of Australia's history and culture, we can mention only a few. Preferred themes were immigrants' experiences; national and regional Australian narratives; myths, folksongs and similar collections; and analyses of all kinds of oral and written narratives. What can probably be concluded as an overall perspective on the contributions from Australian scholars is that they tended towards a different conception of narratives to those we are used to. Had there been any discussion of definition of how to treat narratives, one side would have been quite conservative, focussing on collecting and conserving, while the Australasians tended to take narratives out of their context and apply them to whatever problem in cultural and social history they are working on (immigration, social mobility, modern myth, postcolonial struggles, etc.).

In a sense, however, one can say that the more traditional definition of what folk narrative is and can be was accompanied by an English-French definition of narrative deduced from postmodern theories. Papers about the *Cross-dressing of Science Fiction Fans* by Hellen Merrick, or the Swiss TV Soap opera *Lüthi & Blanc*, by Brigitte Frizzoni or on *Flight Rage* by Thomas Wittich, are no longer dealing with tale-types and not even with new genres (such as jokes and urban legends). They instead focus on imagination, media-narrating techniques and belief-systems which they would probably define as narrative systems. It seems to us that there is a certain need to reflect on such changes of definition, and publicly discuss them at one of the conferences.

Another point which could be added here is what one could call congress discipline. A large number of congress papers were given by presenters who did not participate in the conference. They would appear in the section to which they had been scheduled, deliver their papers, and leave immediately afterwards. In other words: they wanted to have an audience for their presentation, but were not willing or interested to hear and discuss those of others. Therefore the conference itself was in terms of attendance a rather small one, with sometimes only 50 people in the plenary sessions, and 3-12 in the sections.

Although traditional topics of folk narrative research (collecting, classifying and analysing of oral material) had not totally disappeared from the pro-

gramme, a general characterisation of the conference was the move towards new horizons of narratology. However, in the absence of any guidelines on new directions established by the ISFNR authorities or by a selection committee, the future of the ISFNR could possibly end in an 'anything goes' situation – and this is not what we would want.

All in all, the Melbourne conference was a well-run event with lovely moments and friendly meetings. We loved the overwhelming hospitality of our Australian hosts, and everybody especially appreciated the interethnic lunches at Melbourne University and the generous concluding banquet at Ormond College Hall. We were, moreover, delighted by the numerous storytelling events, film presentations and music performances which were offered during the evenings. At the General Meeting two important decisions were made: that the next interim conference will be organised by the new treasurer of the ISFNR, Ulf Palmenfelt, in Gotland in 2003; and that the invitation of Mare Kõiva to hold the 14th ISFNR congress in Tartu in Estonia in 2004 was accepted.