

Preface

by Alexander Fenton

In 1949 Gyula Ortutay wrote in his preface to the first issue of *Folia Ethnographica*, published by the Ethnographic Institute of the Pázmány Péter University of Budapest, that it fulfilled a long-felt need, and that for a long time the results of researches in Hungarian ethnology had been inaccessible to foreign colleagues who did not understand Hungarian. The intention of *Folia Ethnographica*, using Russian, English and French, was to give an account of Hungarian work on the one hand, and to provide comparative data for international purposes on the other.¹

The first issue of 30 years ago is worth looking at more closely, for the trends that it was setting. Károly Marót wrote in it about history and ethnology. He did not use the word ethnology in the way in which it is used now (in the present publication "ethnology" or "regional ethnology" is equated, as now agreed between European scholars, with "Volkskunde", "folk life", etc.), but rather contrasted it with the discipline of history, by which the past should be examined "wie es eigentlich war", as it really was, to use Ranke's expression. Ethnology for Marót had to do with poetical and religious values, which were not factual, and could therefore be misleading in any attempt to make a historical reconstruction. For most present-day European scholars, ethnology is a historical discipline, and it might appear that there has been a complete *volte-face* since Marót's time. Yet this is not so. Marót was, of course, writing in the spirit of the intellectual fashion of his period, but in his specific examination of the myth of the separation of Sky and Earth, he was concerned to observe that a historical attitude forbade statements about myths originating at definite points in time. Thus his approach was historical, and his view of ethnology was critical in a sound historical way. His refusal to force the strait-jacket of preconception on historical evidence is an attitude not different from the one we should now have.²

Material aspects of history were looked at by Professor István Tálasi in his article on peasant farming, poaching and fishing,³ that is, the basic sources of food-production and food-getting, which provided not only the means for subsistence at a local level, but also—in terms of cattle and later grain—a primary source of international trade. Tálasi was not so much giving information here about techniques, practices, equipment and tools, however, as examining the types and methods of study carried out up to the 1940s by his compatriots. From the 18th century, some attention was being given to the life of the peasantry and to their occupations, coinciding broadly with the period when feudal conditions and feudal service bonds were moving towards an overdue end. This was mainly from the angle of geography and economics, however, and interest of this kind continued till the later 19th century. A more scientific interest in the collection and analysis of the concrete details of material culture did not really develop till the 1890s.

Even so, it had a body of earlier sources of a related kind from which it could quarry, such as the plentiful practical farming literature, which, as in Britain, compared current with older situations. Historical perspective over 150 to 200 years can be got as a result, and this is a kind of source of which ethnologists can still make much use.

Iván Balassa has himself taken up this line of activity to good effect. His doctoral thesis on maize, and his study of the history of the plough and of ploughing, are major works that draw heavily on such sources, as do a host of articles published by him.⁴ He was also responsible for setting up, within the Agricultural Museum, a Historical Archive of Agricultural Implements, which contains, amongst other things, the results of surveys of such implements in other Hungarian museums.

Since about 1950, too, a series of subject monographs has appeared on aspects of cultivation under Professor Tálasi, generally following the "Wörter und Sachen" approach, and with a historical orientation that often lays emphasis on the medieval period. Much attention is paid to the cultivation of grain, to changes in work techniques and productivity, and to analysis of the social motives that underlie production. The subjects include tobacco, maize, potatoes and paprika, and take into consideration questions of diffusion, acceptance, etc., as well as comparative material from neighbouring countries. The technical circumstances of cultivation remain most prominent, however. These studies take the subject through to the industrial period, in Hungary beginning essentially in the latter half of the 19th century, and have continued unbroken.⁵ Attention was also paid to crop-raising, at home and in neighbouring countries, as indicated by a substantial volume on grain cultivation in East and Central Europe, edited by Balassa in 1972.⁶

The life and equipment of herdsmen has been a favourite topic of study, partly influenced by the earlier nomadism of the Hungarians, though in this respect they are also an organic part of South-East Europe. Volumes on animal husbandry and the culture of shepherds, published in 1961 and 1969, exemplify the methods of approach through working techniques, language and ergology, applied here over an area stretching from South-East Europe to Western Asia.⁷ In recent years some detailed regional and general studies of pastoral life have appeared from Debrecen, under the general editorship of Professor Béla Gunda.⁸

Since the 1930s there has been active research into settlement patterns and buildings. I. Szabó has used ethnological concepts for historical purposes in his study of the development of villages, and a number of local studies of buildings have also appeared from Debrecen. Usually questions of chronology are given priority in buildings studies, and the influence of joiners and masons on the art of building in the last century and a half has been examined.

A development of recent years has been the holistic ethnological study of particular regions. A number of attractive regional handbooks has come from the Gondolat Press,⁹ and another recent example deals with the marshy Kis-Balaton and its surroundings.¹⁰ Studies of themes, such as the history of the way in which country folk have made use of the resources of the forests,¹¹ also continue to flow from the pens of Hungarian ethnologists.

19th-century researchers concentrated on ethnic character and origins, seeing Hungarian peasant agriculture as having a double origin, either Asiatic, or German and Slav derived. The distribution of material data such as the treading out of grain in the open-air by the feet of animals, the underground storage of grain in pits, etc., was cited to illustrate the theory. J. Csaplovics, writing in 1822, was the one who brought such ethnic problems into ethnological perspective. Crop-raising, and the life and equipment of herdsmen and fishermen were subjected to scrutiny, and related to linguistic¹² and archaeological evidence.

The ideas and conclusions of the earlier researchers have been modified now in the light of increased knowledge, but this is normal and natural in any growing subject. The important thing is that there should be a system, even if only used as a provisional framework, if a subject is to get past the stage of simple collection. And this stage was well and truly passed by Hungarian scholars. There was at first the emphasis on origins, perhaps a natural result of a search for identity. Part of this was a search for traces of the traditions of the past surviving into the present, as happened also in Britain,¹³ but with the work of István Györffy and his contemporaries in the 1920s, ethnology began to be given an integrated shape which led in the 1930s to a desire for a comprehensive synthesis. This was attempted in the volumes of *A Magyarorszag Néprajza* (The Ethnography of the Hungarians. 1933-37), a remarkable work by the standards of any country, which not only presented factual data, but also helped to stimulate and guide the work of post-1930 ethnologists, making them aware of the importance of a social outlook besides the usual historical problems. The first edition was sold out before it even got on to the market. At the same time relevant museum collections were being built up, and in 1949 Tálasi, in looking at agriculture as a whole and some of its constituent factors, and the ramifications of its links with the entire civilization of the country and the mental world, made a plea for a synthesis of the whole. He has had to wait for 30 years for the present book by Balassa and Ortutay.

The same long-term trend-setting volume of *Folia Ethnographica* included an article by Linda Dégh.¹⁴ She outlined the ancestry of the discipline of folklore, and showed, partly by assessing the work of individual collectors and scholars, how attitudes to the subject and the methodology of approach have changed since the age of 19th-century romanticism, when folk literature and what it had to say about the national self was the primary object. In pursuing the public collection of folk literature, customs, language, dances, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, founded through the inspiration of István Széchenyi (whose father, Ferenc, was involved in the founding of the Hungarian National Museum), played a strong directional part.

Subsequently the character of the country itself changed. It was then an underdeveloped country in both the economists' and geographers' senses. The people in general were not town dwellers. The market towns were agricultural centres, and industrial centres with a brisk trade and full supporting services were lacking. Handicrafts were very much in the hands of incoming craftsmen, especially Germans. The aristoc-

racy kept out of the way in Austria or Transylvania, and the nobility lived on their estates in a certain degree of isolation from each other. The serfs had no opportunities for education or improvement—and indeed their full liberation in Hungary is so recent that a living writer, Gyula Illyés, could describe their feudal conditions of existence from personal knowledge, in his book *People of the Puszta*.¹⁵ Out of such a background came an almost feverish search for origins, for identity. After the end of the century, when the Hungarian Ethnological Society was founded, its journal *Ethnographia* at first reflected this concern with ancient history, philology and literature, the motifs of folk-poetry being seen as one of the chief sources of ancient history.

There was much discussion about whether or not folklore and material culture should be separate. Investigators of mental culture with a literary bias in their training, and of material culture with an archaeological, geographical and technical bias, tended to go their own separate ways in the 1920s. On both sides, attitudes to collection and research were conditioned by the times. In folk-tale collecting, for example, the reconstructing of a "type", and observation of variants, played a dominant role. The question of evolution was scarcely considered, and in this respect, a great deal is owed to the work of the musicians, people like Bartók and Kodály, through whom folklorists learned the virtues of total as opposed to selective collection, and began to look at the complete repertoires of folk-singers and tellers of tales, or even of the inhabitants of an entire village.

A further step towards what might be called applied folklore (or indeed applied ethnology) was taken by folklorists like Gyula Ortutay, who realized that help in agrarian reform could be given through an understanding of the complex mentality of the people (including all ethnic groups). They sought to examine the entire peasant society, and to see the elements of their subject (including the individual) in the perspective of the communal framework of peasant life. This was all the more easily possible because folk tales are still alive, so that the links between the individual and the community, the ways of presentation, the dynamics of new creation, and so on, can be readily examined. The degrees of contact and divergence between folk-poetry and literary poetry were studied. Application or functionalism became part of the approach, as did an increasing ability to interpret the past due to the full recording of data as a sound base for subsequent analysis. It came to be considered that no traditions were meaningless, and that elements of culture were not necessarily survivals from one generation to another, but were always being re-created, or at least adapted as the people's circumstances changed from generation to generation. Transmission was seen as a matter of revival rather than survival, and this has sometimes led to the view that the scope of ethnology was the present. This more sociological orientation, however, which now marks the subject in many countries, need not deny the historical background, for this is essential in order to estimate the present correctly. In this respect, in the field of ballad research, one may point to two recent studies of the French origins of the ballad in medieval Hungary, and of Hungary as a centre of diffusion in East Central Europe.¹⁶

In my own view ethnology is a discipline concerned with the past as much as with the present, the one leading up to the other. But it is a complex discipline, as life is complex, and it has many facets attracting workers whose individual backgrounds and skills will dictate each individual approach. Each contributes to the whole, and the present book is a courageous attempt to view the total subject, updating and amending in the light of modern research the material presented 30 years ago in *A Magyarorság Néprajza*. This double achievement is a clear indication of the established nature and strength of ethnological studies in Hungary, as also is the fact that the time has already come when books of over 400 pages about the history of Hungarian ethnology¹⁷ can be written. The American Hungarian Foundation has listed 314 items in a bibliography of English language resources on the subject.¹⁸ This, in conjunction with the present book and its bibliography, gives the English-speaking world a change to come to grips with Hungarian ethnology, and to profit from it accordingly.

What, to an observer like myself, are the characteristics of present-day Hungarian ethnology? I have been both impressed and inspired by the wealth of literature produced on the subject. The three dimensions of material, mental and social culture are generally held to be the cornerstones of ethnology, but perhaps no other country has been so much aware of ethnic criteria as a further essential element. It has been said that social culture has never developed in Hungary as an independent branch of ethnology, since so many aspects are covered by related disciplines,¹⁹ but still there exist monumental studies, such as the three volumes on the village of Átány by Fél and Hofer,²⁰ and the present compendium of wide experience and knowledge pays much attention too to social culture. This is an area on which future writers will undoubtedly build. At the same time I find it good that the material culture of the past and present remains prominent in the work that goes on. There has been a swing in some countries to a preference for a more sociological type of approach, and this has had its effect in Hungary too, but the everyday, concrete facts of the material by which people live must remain the firm base on which alone ethnological theory can confidently be built. Since 1958, the co-ordinated collection of data for the *Hungarian Ethnological Atlas* by almost every active ethnologist in the country (which Gyula Ortutay helped to make possible) has given ethnological work in Hungary a degree of cohesion that is rare. And in 1977 there appeared from the press the first volume of another vast project, the *Hungarian Ethnological Lexicon, A—E*.²¹ (Since then, the other four volumes have also been published.) The record is enviable, and I welcome the present achievement of Gyula Ortutay, for whom it is now, sadly, a memorial, and of Iván Balassa. The ideals of the first volume of *Folia Ethnographica* have been substantially achieved.