More a Lore than a Literature

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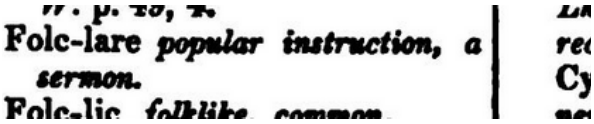
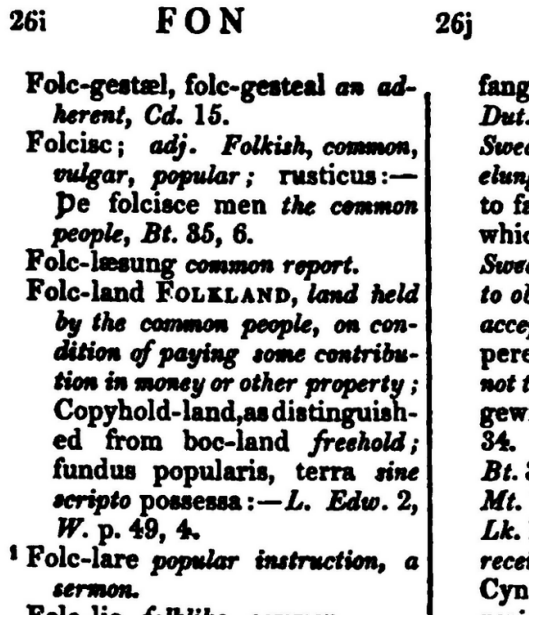
This contribution follows on from Frog's article in the previous *FFN Bulletin*, which addressed the question of whether the word 'folklore' was a calque of the German term *Volkskunde* (Frog 2024). In a nutshell, Frog is correct that it is not. There are two strong reasons why. The first is that if 'folklore' was a loan translation of a German word, it would be of *Volkslehre* rather than *Volkskunde* (i.e. of a word denoting 'the lore of the people' rather than of a word meaning 'knowledge about the populus'), and would display the possessive *-s*, i.e. 'folkslore'. The second reason relates to Thoms' description of his coinage as "a good Saxon compound" (1846: 862). When he uses "good Saxon", does he mean to suggest this is a term he recently heard on his travels in Saxony-Anhalt or that he came across the word in book from Niedersachsen? No. In using 'Saxon', he is not referring to any contemporary region of Germany, but to the Anglo-Saxons, and thus to the earliest centuries of the English language.

If we remark that 'folklore' is the first of the English *folk*-compounds (Frog 2024: 8), we are missing half the point. It may be the first (or among the first) of such *folk*-compounds in the nineteenth century (and hence in the *Oxford English Dictionary* data). But when we look at lexicographical sources focusing on earlier periods of the language, such as the *Dictionary of Old English* or the *Middle English Dictionary*, we find numerous *folk*- compounds, words such as *folc-lond* 'land held by the common people', *folk-mot* 'public meeting', *folc-stow* 'public place', etc. It is these older English terms that will have acted as Thoms' primary model for his famous neologism. Joseph Bosworth's *Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language*, published less than a decade earlier than Thoms' famous 'folklore' note (1838), even has an entry for *folc-lare* (Figure 1). Jeffrey Alan Mazo (1996) already noticed the existence of the word in the Old English period, but assumed that Thoms could not have known it, as the three Anglo-Saxon manuscripts it is found in had not been published by 1846; Mazo had forgotten about the existence of Bosworth's dictionary. In that work, Bosworth defines the word as "popular instruction, a sermon"; an Old English author glosses it in Latin as "popularis institutio vel instructio, homilia, sermo" 'popular education or instruction, homily, sermon'. We might further note that in Bosworth's dictionary, all the *folc*- words are all capitalized and hyphenated (e.g. *Folc-læsung, Folc-land, Folk-lare*, etc.; see Figure 2), just as Thoms' original spelling of the word and its derivatives (Thoms even spoke of *Folk-lorists*). Furthermore, rather than presenting the now-standard form 'folclar' (e.g. Clark Hall 1931: 123), Bosworth's headword form is 'Folc-lare'. If 'folk-lore' can be said to be a calque, it is a calque of an Old English word.



Folc-lare *popular instruction, a sermon.*

Figure 1. Image of the entry for 'Folc-lare' in Bosworth's (1838) *Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language.*



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Folc-gestæl, folc-gesteal *an adherent, Cd.* 15.
Folcisc; *adj. Folkish, common, vulgar, popular*; rusticus:—Þe folcisce men *the common people, Bt.* 85, 6.
Folc-læsung *common report.*
Folc-land FOLKLAND, *land held by the common people, on condition of paying some contribution in money or other property*; Copyhold-land, as distinguished from boc-land *freehold*; fundus popularis, terra *sine scripto* possessa:—*L. Edw.* 2, *W.* p. 49, 4.
Folc-lare *popular instruction, a sermon.*

Figure 2. Image of the entry for 'Folc-lare' in Bosworth's (1838) Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language

I am not entirely sure who the proponents of the German theory are – one twenty-first century scholar hints at a German origin for the word but is circumspect about saying anything definite (Ó Giolláin 2022: 98–99), while a twentieth century scholar doubts whether Thoms knew of the word *Volkskunde* by 1846 (Emrich 1946: 372). We are on firmer ground in identifying the views of the nineteenth-century linguist Richard Trench. He stated outright shortly after the word's coining that it had been "borrowed recently from the

German" (Trench 1855: 60). But Trench seems to be bluffing: he does not offer a German original the word might have been based on and he also supposes that *folklore* means 'popular superstitions'.

Having agreed so far with Frog, I nevertheless disagree with him on a number of other issues. Firstly, Thoms can hardly be described as having an "ethno-nationalistic ideology" (Frog 2024: 8), not at least in the sense we find in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'ethno-nationalism': "advocacy of or support for the interests of a particular ethnic group, esp. with regard to its national independence or self-determination". Thoms was certainly a cultural nationalist (Roper 2008) and was also intermittently a linguistic revivalist (sometimes he favoured a Saxonism, other times he gloried in a gorgeous Latinism), but he did not emphasize ethnic stock or advocate for the English as an ethnic group. Secondly, from what I said above, it should be clear that I do not believe that *Volksüberlieferung* (Frog 2024: 10) was the model for *folklore* either. Nevertheless, about the main thing Frog is right.

But enough about the word! Focussing on the word means we miss one of the most important theoretical statements Thoms ever made. One reason this statement has been overlooked is because Thoms was not so much a thinker as an energizer, and one does not go to him looking for thought. Another reason is because the theoretical concern is only hinted at and not set out at length. It is nevertheless key. There is a scholarly tradition that Thoms coined 'folklore' to replace the word 'popular antiquities'. To give just one example, Dan Ben-Amos writes of the "notion of 'popular antiquities', which Thoms sought to replace" (1971: 4). Numerous other scholars have asserted the same. I would suggest that Thoms coined the word rather as a replacement for the term 'popular literature'.

The very first sentence in Thoms' famous piece mentions both terms:

> Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though by-the-bye it is more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore, – the Lore of the People) –
>
> (Thoms 1846: 862)

If we zoom in on the start, we see Thoms is claiming that 'popular literature' is an inapt term as the phenomenon it designates is "more a lore than a literature". Thoms does not, by contrast, question the word 'antiquities' here, or state that what he is talking about is 'more Lore than antiquities'. Likewise, in 1878, when looking back at the effect reading Francis Palgrave's articles had on him as a youth, Thoms remarks the articles in question were "on popular Literature, Superstitions and Customs, and similar matters, now commonly recognised under the generic name of Folk-Lore" (Thoms 1878: xiii). Once again, it is the term 'popular literature' he is singling out; he does not mention his coinage as having encompassed 'popular antiquities'. In fact, Thoms endorses both elements of the term, 'popular' and 'antiquities'. And why shouldn't he?

Thoms saw folklore as a matter of survival from the past, the "olden days" (XXX), the province of antiquarians, and so we find in the same piece him praising Grimm as an "antiquary" and suggesting that the data his correspondents gather will be useful to "the English antiquary" (1846: 863XXX). Three decades later, while using the soubriquet 'an old folk-lorist', he also describes himself as an "antiquarian" (1876: 12). Just as he is content to use the terms 'antiquities', 'antiquarian' and 'antiquary', he is also happy with the concept expressed by the word 'popular'. 'Folk' for him is a synonym for 'popular' (in both of its senses, the people as a whole and the common people in particular), thus he often uses 'popular'. A few years later, he published the narratives collected in central England by his protegé Thomas Sternberg, some of the earliest fieldwork fruits inspired by his call (Roper 2014). These contributions were entitled "Popular Stories of the English Peasantry" (Sternberg 1852). Another example comes a quarter of a century later, when in a discussion about the formation of a society to document and study folklore, Thoms speaks of "popular mythology and superstitions" (1876: 12). He is not aiming with his coinage to replace 'popular' with 'folk' *tout court*, and he continues to use the two words synonymously in his own writings.

So, whilst 'popular' and 'antiquities' are unobjectional words for him, what he takes issue with in 1846 is the use of the word 'literature' in the context of *knowledge* and *behaviour*. Because his remark was made in passing and without any explicit expansion, one of his key theoretical statements has gone unnoticed for approaching two centuries. Let us restate it here. Thoms recognizes that a lot of what we are interested in as folklorists is lore (something learnt), not something written down, not 'literature' in the etymological sense (not written down that is until the folklorists get to work – but this is another story.)

Thoms may have thought the word self-evident, but in any event, he goes give us some examples of folklore: "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs of the olden time" (1846: 862). Contrast this list with that given in the first "Prospectus of the Folklore Society" three decades later: "Popular Fictions and Traditions, Legendary Ballads, Local Proverbial Sayings, Superstitions, and Old Customs" (Folklore Society 1878). When we compare the two lists, we see that there are more forms of custom and belief, and fewer verbal genres, in the earlier list, and that the forms of custom and belief come first in the 1846 list, but only appear after the verbal genres in the later list. I suggest the 1846 order (and number) of phenomena is deliberate, in order to move the focus away from verbal genres (such as ballads and proverbs), which might be

understood as 'popular literature', something which would undermine Thoms' whole case about the unsuitability of the word 'literature'. We might further note that in the 1878 Prospectus, the Society's goal is stated as being the "collecting and publishing of the relics of popular antiquities" and that the very first line of the Prospectus opens: "That there is a wide-spread and growing interest in our Popular Antiquities" (Folklore Society 1878: 1). So much for the idea that Thoms, the Director and Council Member of the new society, wished to abolish the word "popular antiquities", when he is still using it more than three decades later.

Thoms was not against the word 'literature' *per se*, he was against its misuse. When the occasion came to use it correctly, he would. For example, he describes chapbooks as an "interesting branch of our popular literature" (1878: 286). In a way, what is going on with Thoms' coinage is reminiscent of the debates a century and more later about whether 'oral literature' was a useful term or whether it should be abandoned (e.g. Finnegan 1992: 9–10).

Nowadays, Thoms is remembered chiefly for his coinage of the word 'folklore' and maybe also for his role in founding the [British] Folklore Society and establishing the still-extant journal *Notes and Queries*, and its (now-closed) corpus of folklore data. He is not seen as having been a thinker or theorist in the way we might conceive of his successors Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Edwin Sidney Hartland, or Laurence Gomme. This is no doubt just. Nevertheless, there were times he did engage in thought on folklore matters, and the parenthesis my piece has concentrated on was one of them.

One final remark. While Thoms asserts that 'lore' is a *more* appropriate term than 'literature', he does not claim that it is a perfect fit with the material. In other words, a better term might yet be coined. Food for thought, perhaps.

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