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William Henderson: ‘A Folk-Lore Student before Folk-Lore Came into Vogue’

Andrew Teverson

Abstract

William Henderson’s *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (1866) is one of the richest records of British folk customs furnished by the nineteenth century. Despite the significance of this collection, however, relatively little work has been undertaken to understand Henderson’s importance to folklore studies. In response, this article draws upon archival research and Henderson’s published works (including his angling memoir) to provide insights into his biography, and to trace his emergence as ‘a Folk-Lore student before Folk-Lore came into vogue’. This biographical approach facilitates an appreciation of the social and political context in which the collection was made, in particular that of the nineteenth-century industrialization of the North, in which Henderson had a vested interest. Henderson’s *Notes*, it is proposed, represents a negotiation between his passion for preserving tradition and his simultaneous belief in the merits of industrial progress.

Introduction

Great part of the county of Durham is indeed spoiled (in an antiquarian point of view) by collieries; but it still contains some quiet villages far away from great thoroughfares, where strange tales are yet told and strange old customs practised; while the north and west of Northumberland, and the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, abound with them. (Henderson 1879b, 1)

Between 1990 and 1991, during my first undergraduate year, I lived at number three The Bailey—a College of Durham University. I was studying for a joint degree in English Literature and Philosophy, and was already interested in traditional narratives and the close connections between narrative and identity; an interest that eventually coalesced into a dissertation on the uses of folk narrative tradition in the fiction of Walter Scott. What I did not know then was that the College I was staying in had, a little over a century before, been the house of William Henderson, the industrialist and amateur antiquarian, who had written one of the great treatises on popular traditions of the nineteenth century, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern*

Counties of England and the Borders (Henderson 1866), a work that was heavily indebted to Scott, and that drew extensively upon the unpublished manuscripts of one of Scott's protégés, Thomas Wilkie.¹

That I was unaware of this at the time is perhaps forgivable. Henderson's presence in the house was not (and to my knowledge is still not) memorialized in the College, and his works were not taught on the English Literature programme of the University that had come to own his property. My ignorance of the fact that I was living in Henderson's house also reveals something about Henderson's reputation. Henderson remains a relatively obscure figure, even in his hometown, and outside a few passages in works of folklore history—Richard Dorson's *The British Folklorists* (1968, 319–24) being a notable example—scholarship does not have a great deal to say about him. For many scholars, he is a footnote to the story of British folklore; and yet Henderson, along with his wife's aunt, Susanna Warren, who worked with him on *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties*, was responsible for gathering together and preserving a great deal of information about customary practices in the North of England and on the Scottish Borders that might otherwise have been lost, including a disparate collection of stories that, in subsequent anthologies, have played a significant role in shaping the imaginative mental life of the British Isles.

On this basis, I believe that Henderson's *Notes* deserves to be better remembered and better studied than it is. This article represents a first tentative step in that direction, which, it is hoped, will encourage further work on the subject. On a personal front, it is also a small act of reparation to the shades of Henderson and Warren, for inhabiting their domain as a nascent folklorist without giving due recognition to their contribution to the field.

William Henderson: Industrialist, Politician, and Angler

William Henderson was born in the County of Durham in 1813, in the closing years of the Napoleonic Wars, and at the pinnacle of the Industrial Revolution. He was the second son of Gilbert Henderson, a farmer and latterly a weaver, who had set up the lucrative Henderson carpet-weaving factory at Walkergate in Durham City in the year of William's birth. At this time, the family lived in the small town of Kirk Merrington, eight miles south of Durham City; but as the new business became established, the Hendersons took up residence at 'an old house' known as Shakelock Hall, on the River Wear, near the city's centre (Austin 2001, 1–2; Henderson 1879a, 1). It was here that William received his formal education, first at 'a school kept by an austere little lady named by her pupils Miss Nipsey', and latterly at schools in Witton-le-Wear and Durham City (Henderson 1879a, 11 and 21). In August 1824, when William was just eleven years old, his father died having been 'attacked by a severe and lingering illness' caused, in Henderson's view, 'by remaining in wet clothes after a long wild drive in an open carriage across the Whitby moors' (Henderson 1879a, 4), and in due course management of the company passed to William's elder brother, John, and ultimately, from 1835, to William as well ('Famous City Name' 2010). Two years after taking up this position, William married Mary Chipchase, daughter of the

Durham merchant Thomas Chipchase and sister of his brother's wife Hannah (Austin 2001, 3). The couple would have a single son in 1839 before Mary's early death in 1848. In 1851, Henderson was married again, to Lucy Durham, and from this relationship there were a further nine children, one son and eight daughters. At least one of these children continued the family interest in literature. After emigrating to Canada, his seventh daughter, Julia Willmote Henderson, became 'British Columbia's first female novelist' (Ainley 2018) and author of a series of influential botanical guides to the alpine flowers of Canada published under her married name, Julia Henshaw.²

Like many Victorian industrialists, the Henderson brothers became involved in local politics. John aligned himself with Gladstone's Liberal Party, and, after serving as Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace for the County of Durham, was elected Member of Parliament for the City of Durham in 1864—a seat he held for a decade and lost in 1874 at the close of Gladstone's first administration. William, finding himself in political disagreement with his brother, joined the Conservative party, and was elected as Tory candidate for the St Nicholas ward of Durham in 1845 and, eventually, as Mayor of Durham City from 1848 to 1849 (Austin 2001, 3). In his capacity as Mayor and later Alderman, his major achievement was to raise a subscription from the people of Durham for the construction of Durham Town Hall in the Market Square, a project that was completed by the architect Philip Charles Hardwick in 1851 and remains a prominent feature of Durham's marketplace today.

The 1853 portrait of Henderson by Clement Burlison in the Durham County Council chambers shows a young and handsome man, seated on the mayoral chair, holding architectural plans for the Town Hall, surrounded by the scrolls and symbols of his office (Figure 1). His hands are actively engaged with the architectural drawings he holds, and his intelligent eyes look thoughtfully to one side, as if he is contemplating his next contribution to the public good. This is Henderson the successful man of business whose carpets were displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the influential Mayor, whose plans had reshaped the city ('Famous City Name' 2010).

Alongside his official business as a local industry leader and a political servant, however, Henderson maintained two amateur interests, and it is arguably in these domains that he has had the most enduring impact. He was a passionate angler, ultimately becoming author of the minor classic of its field, *My Life as an Angler* (1876), in which he describes fishing trips he had made in Northumberland, the Scottish Borders, and the Highlands. He also cultivated the practice of observing and making note of customary practices, becoming, as he would later express it, 'a Folk-Lore student before Folk-Lore came into vogue as a pursuit' (Henderson 1879b, vii). These amateur pursuits were not strictly separate in Henderson's mind, and they cross-fertilized one another. The 'scenery so wild and romantic' that he enjoyed whilst on his angling trips was enriched and enlivened by his awareness of the folklore and traditions of the region (Henderson 1879a, 33). Conversely, his fishing trips provided him with opportunities to observe the traditions that he would gather into his folklore collection. On a fishing trip to the Scottish Highlands in 1833 he personally observed an instance of belief in 'second sight' that he later incorporated



Figure 1. William Henderson (1853) by Clement Burlison. Oil on Canvas. Reproduced with the permission of Durham County Council.

into his *Notes* (Henderson 1879b, 345–48). Likewise, a journey over Haddon Rig en route to fish the River Till in 1856 provided him with an opportunity to observe a well used by ‘love-lorn’ maidens to discover their marital future (Henderson 1879a, 194). This feat of prognostication was achieved, Henderson records, by way of a spell:

The fair enquirer had only to borrow the wedding ring of some gude wife, take a glass of water from the well, and with her finger and thumb to suspend over it the ring by a hair from her own pretty head. If the ring struck against the side of the glass she learnt that she should die an old maid, if it turned quickly round she would be married once, if slowly twice. (Henderson 1879a, 1945)

Again, whilst describing a fishing trip with his nephew in 1857 that took him past Linton Church, Henderson takes the opportunity to relay some local traditions that

have 'done much to add a charm to Linton' (Henderson 1879a, 205). A sculpted stone depicting a knight on horseback with a lamb by his side attacking two monsters leads Henderson to recall the 'ancient legend of the Worm of Linton, a terrible dragon whose poisonous breath laid waste the country round till it was destroyed by the Laird of Lariston' (Henderson 1879a, 204). The sandy hill on which the church stands also prompts folkloric reflections:

The geologist may see in this sandy knoll the work of some mighty river of ancient days; the villagers of the neighbourhood account for it by a wild and pathetic legend. They relate how, long ago, a young man slew a priest and was condemned to death; but his sisters, two fair maidens, interceded for him and at last won his pardon on condition that they should sift sand enough to form a mound on which to erect a church. The maidens undertook the task and completed it, though one of them it is said died of fatigue immediately afterwards. (Henderson 1879a, 204–205)

Fishing and folklore also coalesced for Henderson around the figure of Charles Ebdy (1790–1862), a local ropemaker turned river worker he had befriended in his youth and who remained a lifelong companion. Despite an age difference of twenty-three years, Henderson and Ebdy enjoyed numerous fishing trips together, initially to local havens for anglers, such as Weldon Bridge on the River Coquet, and eventually further afield, to encompass the rivers of Northumbria and the Borders. During these trips, Ebdy would share his knowledge of fly fishing with Henderson, but also impressed the younger man with his powers of observation and his knowledge of local lore. 'A flight of birds, a hornet's nest, the otter gliding by', Henderson records, would all evoke from Ebdy 'some anecdote illustrating their natural history' (Henderson 1879a, 39).

Henderson's acquaintance with Ebdy also provided opportunities for the budding folklorist to observe traditional practices in action. For instance, when reports were received of a distressed young woman who had drowned herself in the river, Henderson witnessed his friend floating 'a large white-bread loaf loaded with mercury' on the water, convinced that this would lead to the discovery of the body (Henderson 1879a, 37). A description of this practice (although the example of Ebdy is not cited) would later appear in *Notes*, in which Henderson relays accounts of people floating loaves of bread on rivers, variously furnished with lit candles or quicksilver, in an attempt to discover the location of the drowned (Henderson 1879b, 59–60).

George Neasham, a slightly younger contemporary of Henderson, strengthens this impression of Ebdy as a carrier of tradition, recalling the boat-builder as a man in whom 'lingered many old time superstitions' (Neasham 1893, 81). In particular, Neasham remembers Ebdy as a storyteller who 'told yarns with the greatest facility and felicity' and who could 'make your hair stand on end, and your blood curdle in your veins, by the recital of stories of ghosts and goblins' (Neasham 1893, 81). This skill in storytelling, Neasham speculates, had a profound impression on Henderson: 'We fancy it must have been from Ebdy', Neasham writes, 'that Mr. Henderson drew his early inspiration for the marvellous, and it is possible that the old gentleman's wonderful tales formed the nucleus of the interesting book which he published in after life on folklore and kindred subjects' (Neasham 1893, 81). Ebdy thus emerges from Neasham's

account as a key influence upon Henderson, shaping both his interest in angling and his preoccupation with the oral history and storytelling of the North of England.

The Compilation of Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties

The point at which Henderson began to assemble his *Notes* is not clear, but a critical moment in his emergence as a folklorist came in 1861 when, as President of the Durham Athenaeum, he was invited to deliver a lecture to its members, and elected to speak on the folklore of the Northern Counties. No doubt, he chose the subject because he already had materials to hand, but in order to swell his store he reached out to friends and neighbours requesting their help in assembling materials of relevance to his topic. The response to this call, he later recorded, was 'zealous', and in a short space of time he was able to acquire 'a considerable collection of the stories, sayings, and superstitions of old Northumbria' (Henderson 1879b, viii) which he laid before the Durham Athenaeum when the lecture took place on 14 May 1861. How the Club responded to these materials is not a matter of historical record, but it seems to have been encouraging enough for him to share a transcript with Charlotte Mary Yonge, the editor of a successful periodical for young Christian women titled *The Monthly Packet*, and a friend of the author and educator Susanna Warren, who was at that point staying with the Hendersons at number three The Bailey.

Warren had been corresponding with Yonge for a number of years on a variety of subjects (see Mitchell, Jordan, and Schinske n.d.), including their shared interest in religious education and the operations of the religious publishing house, The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), with which they were both involved. Warren and Yonge also enjoyed a mutual interest in the materials of folklore and custom, and periodically shared observations about the latest developments in the field. Thus, when John Francis Campbell of Islay published the first volumes of his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–62), Yonge wrote to Warren in May 1861 to ask whether she had seen this new volume, and singled out for attention Campbell's 'Northern Blue beard' ('The Widow and her Daughters') in which 'a little cat who licks off the blood, helps the lady out of the scrape teaches her to disenchant Blue beard (not that he has a blue beard) and becomes a princess'.³ Yonge, in her letters, also beseeches Warren's support in various projects. Writing to her about her history of British Christian names in February 1861, and reflecting upon the intersections between names and traditional customs, Yonge asks Warren whether she could 'make a collection of these old Durham customs and let [her] have them for the *Monthly Packet*'.⁴ On the basis of this established correspondence, it seems likely that it was Warren who proposed sending Henderson's lecture on folklore to Yonge. Certainly, when the lecture was late in arriving, it was to Warren that Yonge wrote, in May 1861, with an enquiry about its delivery.⁵

By 10 December 1861 the reworked lecture had been delivered, for Yonge wrote directly to Henderson on this date, noting that the manuscript that had been sent was too long for a single volume and would need to be split into two articles.⁶ In fact,

Henderson's contribution eventually appeared over three months, in the July, August, and September 1862 issues of *The Monthly Packet* (Henderson 1862b, 1862c, 1862d). In these articles Henderson wrote about a variety of topics, including uses made of pins in traditional practices, folklore associated with birds, and the actions of 'tricksy sprites' such as the Barguest and the Padfoot (Henderson 1862c, 128). The third and final article is of especial note for its inclusion of the first of the narratives published by Henderson that would enter the canon of British folktales. This is the story titled 'The Hand of Glory' collected for Henderson by an associate who had heard about Henderson's interest in items of tradition and noted it down in the spring of 1861 from the narration of an older woman named Bella Parkin from the village of High Spital on Bowes Moor in the County of Durham.⁷ Naturally, Henderson was delighted to receive this story, saying that it had been 'rescued from oblivion by the preserving kindness of friends' (Henderson 1862d, 253). He also records his surprise at finding the story being told in England. 'Wild and varied as I know the superstitions of my native county to be', he wrote, 'I must plead guilty to some astonishment at discovering among them ... the *foreign* superstition of the Hand of Glory, once firmly believed in many parts of France, Germany, and Spain' (Henderson 1879b, 200; italics in original). The story now commonly appears in anthologies of British folktales, including E. S. Hartland's *English Fairy and Other Folk Tales* (1890), Katharine Briggs's *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* (1970–71), and Neil Philips's *Penguin Book of English Folktales* (1992).

One of Henderson's principal conclusions, following his work on the Athenaeum lecture and *The Monthly Packet* articles, and a lesson he carried into his subsequent research studies, was that there remained a rich seam of tradition in popular memory that needed to be mined and preserved swiftly, since the materials of tradition were 'no longer firmly rooted in the popular mind' (Henderson 1879b, viii). He cites two particular causes for this erosion of tradition. First, that the general diffusion of education in the region had replaced 'the spontaneous expression of the thoughts and feelings of the mass of our peasantry' with 'fresh subjects of thought' (Henderson 1879b, viii). Second, that the displacement of families that resulted from 'the working of collieries and the extension of railways' had resulted in people being 'wrenched away from local associations' and therefore failing to 'transmit [traditions] to their descendants' (Henderson 1879b, viii–ix). Combined, these two major social shifts have, in Henderson's view, resulted in a situation in which 'old habits and customs, old laws and sayings, old beliefs and superstitions, which have held their ground in the universal mind from the remotest antiquity, are fast fading away and perishing' (Henderson 1879b, vii). To counteract this perceived decline in tradition, he redoubled his efforts in collecting, 'noting down carefully every morsel of Folk Lore' that came before him and preserving it in written records (Henderson 1879b, ix).

An insight into how Henderson went about securing materials at this time is supplied in a letter dated 14 April (with no year given) preserved in the pages of a privately printed copy of Henderson's lecture in Durham City Library, and discovered by the Durham historian John Austin.⁸ The letter is to an unidentified male correspondent and

has been sent at the suggestion of Henderson's friend Canon Humble of Perth. In it, Henderson tells his correspondent that he has enclosed the copy of his privately printed manuscript and informs him that it is soon to be printed 'in one of our magazines', an observation that serves to date the letter to 1862, shortly before *The Monthly Packet* articles appeared. Henderson also takes the opportunity of sending the manuscript to make his important request:

3 South Bailey
April 14

My Dear Sir,

a short time since Mr Humble told me that you had expressed a wish to read my notes on the folk lore of the north; I have had a few copies printed for private circulation among my friends,—and now send one for the pleasure of your acceptance. I have had the honour to be asked to allow it to be printed in one of our magazines and it is now coming out in parts monthly.

Mr Humble further tells me that you take an interest in the question—I am very glad to hear this,—should any strange tales of superstitions or old customs come in your way I should be greatly obliged if you would jot them down for me.

Believe me dear sir most truly yours

W Henderson

Such requests were productive. In the years following the lecture, Henderson significantly increased the quantity of materials he had available to him, and by 1866 he had concluded the process of compiling the disparate notes he had assembled into a coherent book-length volume for publication.

The extent of Warren's contribution to the process at this stage is not recorded, but it is certain that it extended well beyond handling and transmitting the text of the lecture. Henderson is unambiguous on this subject, acknowledging Warren's contribution in the prefaces of both editions of *Notes* in 1866 and 1879, and indicating that he would have issued the volume under both their names if this had not been vetoed by Warren. In the preface to the first volume he writes:

I ... have not pursued my labours singlehanded, although it is the wish of my fellow-worker, who desires only to be designated by the initials S. W., that this volume comes out under my name alone. I cannot, however, in justice do less than state here that her share in the work has been fully equal to my own. (Henderson 1879b, xi)

In the second edition he names Warren in full and concludes:

It only remains for me to add, that I feel it impossible for me sufficiently to express my obligations to my relative, Miss Susanna Warren, for much valuable assistance rendered to the work; indeed, ours must be understood to have been a joint labour. (Henderson 1879b, xiv)

The extent of Warren's contribution is perhaps best indicated by a comparison between an article published under Warren's initials in *The Monthly Packet* in October 1861 titled 'The Worms of the North' (Warren 1861), which Yonge refers to in a letter to Warren of 9 May 1861 as 'your dragon paper', and the chapter of Henderson's *Notes* titled 'Worms or Dragons'.⁹ The near identity of a number of the passages in Warren's earlier paper with the material published in Henderson's book shows, at the

very least, that there was a free exchange of work between the two writers, which in turn lends credence to Henderson's claim that Warren should be regarded as a co-author.¹⁰

The Structure and Sources of Notes

Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders was issued by the London publisher Longman's, Green and Co. in 1866. Reviews were complimentary,¹¹ and in the longer term there was sufficient enduring interest in the volume, especially in antiquarian and scholarly circles, for it to be reissued by the newly founded Folk-Lore Society in 1879 in a revised and expanded form (Henderson 1879b).

The volume is divided into eleven sections, each dealing with an area of customary practice: specifically, Life and Death, Days and Seasons, Spells and Divinations, Portents and Auguries, Charms and Spells, Witchcraft, Local Sprites, Worms or Dragons, Occult Powers and Sympathies, Haunted Spots, and Dreams. In each chapter, Henderson sketches the broad character of a custom, illustrates it with specific instances, and makes observations about parallel customs.

Broadly speaking, this analysis is comparative in character. For instance, the discussion of accounts of packs of spectral hounds known as Gabriel Hounds in Yorkshire and Durham is supported by examples of similar narratives about 'Wisht Hounds' in Devon and stories of the Wild Hunt from Germany (Henderson 1879b, 129–30). This comparative analysis supports an argument that is primarily aligned with the views advanced by the 'mythological school' of folklorists: that folklore is the remains of once coherent mythological systems that have decayed and become fragmented over time. In his introductory chapter to *Notes*, accordingly, Henderson argues that items of superstitious practice are 'relics of an extensive and deeply-rooted system of mythology, antedating in great measure Christianity itself' (Henderson 1879b, 1).

Henderson is not dogmatic on this front, however, and also recognizes that items of folk tradition come into being in a variety of ways, observing that:

The notices ... of the Folk-Lore of my fellow-countrymen which I have been able to collect during the last few years are widely varied in their origin. If some of them are unmistakeable relics of heathenism, some have their origin in the rites and customs of the unreformed Church, and some in the myths and historical traditions of our ancestors the Saxons and Danes; while others, again, appear to be the spontaneous growth of sensitive and imaginative minds, yearning for communion with a mysterious past and yet more mysterious future. They are varied, too, in their character; some breathing deep religious feeling, some full of light, graceful fancy, while some are gross, vulgar, even cruel superstitions. (Henderson 1879b, 8)

As this may suggest, Henderson received his accounts of folk practices from various sources, including the network of friends and acquaintances already mentioned, but two major sources dominate *Notes*. First, with the assistance of a friend, the Reverend R. O. Bromfield, Henderson had obtained (exactly when is not clear, but it is referenced in *The Monthly Packet* articles) the unpublished manuscript of a collection of Border customs, legends, and superstitions assembled some fifty years earlier by a young medical student named Thomas Wilkie. Wilkie, born around 1789, was the son

of a blacksmith in the village of Bowden in Roxburghshire, and had been encouraged to make this collection by Sir Walter Scott, who intended to use it to support his work on border balladry—although as it transpired, Scott's use of the collection, at least in Henderson's opinion, never extended beyond two short essays on Border minstrelsy (Henderson 1879b, ix). Possibly in gratitude for this service to antiquarianism, Scott had helped arrange for Wilkie a position as ship's surgeon for the East India Company, and in this capacity he sailed for India in 1815. Henderson reports, erroneously, that Wilkie died whilst in India (Henderson 1879b, ix). In fact, he returned to the Borders and established a successful medical practice as 'Dr. Wilkie of Innerleithen' (Smith 2018, 34). He also continued his antiquarian studies, assisting Dr Jamieson with his *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* by providing examples of vernacular expressions current in the Borders—a contribution acknowledged by Jamieson in his supplement to the dictionary of 1825 (Smith 2018, 34).¹²

In his *Notes*, Henderson makes extensive use of the materials Wilkie assembled for Scott, often incorporating substantial passages with minimal adaptation.¹³ From Wilkie, for instance, Henderson takes accounts of death omens, auguries involving bats, elf-stones, brownies, redcaps, and flitting hares. He also borrows from Wilkie a number of Border folktales that have subsequently been assimilated into the archive of Scottish folktales, including a variant of 'The Three Spinners' (ATU 501) titled 'Habetrot and Scatlie Mab', subsequently adopted (and adapted) by Joseph Jacobs in *More English Fairy Tales* (1894), and several tales of witchcraft such as 'The Blacksmith's Wife of Yarrowfoot', 'The Miller of Holdean', and 'The Farmer's Wife of Deloraine', all of which are anthologized in George Douglas's *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales* (1893). Notably, eight tales taken from Wilkie's manuscript by Henderson are included in Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill's survey *The Lore of Scotland: A Guide to Scottish Legends* (Smith 2018; Westwood and Kingshill 2011).

A second major source of information for Henderson came from the correspondence of the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould of Lew Trenchard in Devon, who collected folkloric materials both from his native Devonshire, and from Yorkshire whilst he was working as a curate of the parishes of Horbury and Dalton from 1864 to 1871. Baring-Gould drew upon his extensive knowledge of international folk customs past and present to provide a wealth of illustrative examples and comparative references with which Henderson could enrich his text and notes. He also supplied a significant body of stories, which Henderson incorporated in full. Sixteen of these stories are added as an appendix to the first edition of *Notes*, titled 'Household Tales'.¹⁴ A further three stories supplied by Baring-Gould are also incorporated into the main body of Henderson's text: two versions of the 'Hand of Glory' in the first edition (one of which is also reworked in the appendix), and the story of 'The Giant of Dalton Mill' in the second edition of 1879, which had been communicated to Baring-Gould whilst he was minister at Dalton.

In addition to the materials taken from his dominant sources, Wilkie and Baring-Gould, Henderson was also able to draw upon a range of more piecemeal sources to add range and depth to *Notes*. He received accounts of stories or practices

from a number of individual correspondents, and also had extensive knowledge of published materials concerning his region, which he drew on liberally. From William Dobson's *Rambles on the Ribble* (1864, 137–38) he takes the story 'Dule Upon Dun' (which Dobson in turn took from John Roby's *Traditions of Lancashire* [1843], 1–19); Cuthbert Sharp's *Bishoprick Garland* (1834) supplies the stories of 'The Pelton Brag' (renamed 'Picktree Brag' by Henderson), 'The Cauld Lad of Hilton', and the legend of 'The Lambton Worm'; and the narrative of 'The Laidley Worm of Spindleston Heugh' is adapted into prose from a ballad by Robert Lambe, Vicar of Norham.¹⁵ This latter story is likely to have been adapted by Warren, who had published it first in her 'The Worms of the North' (1861).¹⁶

Henderson's own folkloristic observations also serve to swell the contributions to *Notes*. In the chapter on 'Charms and Spells', for instance, Henderson describes a fishing trip to the Cheviot Hills in which he encounters a shepherd who has been prescribed a cure for rheumatism that involves being laid in a near-frozen stream during the depths of winter—a cure that, Henderson was later to discover, proved fatal to the unfortunate shepherd (Henderson 1879b, 160–61).

Together, these diverse sources result in a work that is wide-ranging, capacious, and entertaining. Perhaps most enduringly, it is also a work that engages in an important act of cultural consolidation and preservation at a critical moment in British history. Henderson's *Notes* was compiled as the North of England was undergoing unprecedented change because of industrialization, and as its communities were becoming more mobile, and thus more fragmented, than ever before. To fully understand Henderson's approach to folklore, therefore, it is also necessary to understand this industrial context, and his attitudes to the forms of social change it initiated.

Folklore and Industrial Revolution

There is some irony in the fact that Henderson was working to preserve elements of tradition in the face of the advance of industrialization, whilst simultaneously reaping the benefits of the industrializing of the North through his family business. He conceives of folklore as an effort to rescue cultural materials from change; yet he also lived by that change. Henderson's position is not inconsistent, however. As an establishment Victorian industrialist, he believed in the necessity of progress, and the corresponding transformation of the countryside and the traditional communities that inhabited it. In turn, the acceptance of the necessity and inevitability of this change gives rise to a recognition of the need—one could even call it a duty—to preserve a record of the practices that are passing away as living traditions. Henderson's approach to tradition is, in this sense, a nostalgic one that values 'old habits and customs' as part of a picturesque past, but also a pragmatic one, that recognizes the inevitable loss of such things in the name of progress. For Henderson, the collieries of Durham—alluded to in the passage of *Notes* quoted as the epigraph of this article—have spoiled a 'great part' of the county 'in an antiquarian point of view'; but by implication, there are other points of view—those of the

pragmatic industrialist—which would justify their impact, and see it as inevitable and irreversible (Henderson 1879b, 1).

Henderson's recognition of a tension between the demands of progress and conservation is reflected in a number of paratextual observations in *Notes*. Significantly, in the opening statement of his collection, in the Preface to the first edition of 1866, he seeks to strike a balance between an attitude of progressive rationalism and antiquarian interest:

The age in which we live is remarkable, as in other points of view, so in this, that old habits and customs, old laws and sayings, old beliefs and superstitions, which have held their ground in the universal mind from the remotest antiquity, are fast fading away and perishing. We of the nineteenth century may congratulate ourselves on their disappearance; we may lament it, but the fact remains the same; and I for one will frankly acknowledge that I regret much which we are losing, that I would not have these vestiges of the past altogether effaced. It were pity that they should utterly pass away, and leave no trace behind. (Henderson 1879b, vii)

This, in effect, commits Henderson to preserving a historical knowledge about tradition whilst accepting that, in David Gross's terms, 'the actual experience of tradition' must be consigned to the past (Gross 1992, 80).

According to Henderson, 'the vast mass of superstition' is to be found 'holding its ground most tenaciously' amongst 'the lower orders' (Henderson 1879b, 1). The traditional ways of life that are passing away, therefore, are generally associated by Henderson with the working classes, who he sees as the primary carriers of tradition. However, although it is less overtly stated in his writing, Henderson also reveals a strong preoccupation with the dynastic traditions of the landed aristocracy. For instance, the story of the Laird of Lariston defeating the Worm of Linton is retold both in Henderson's *Notes* (Henderson 1879b, 295–96) and in his angling memoir (Henderson 1879a, 204–205). This tale is derived by Henderson from the family chronicle *Memorie of the Somervilles* completed in 1679 by James, Eleventh Lord Somerville, in which the story is used to celebrate the lineage of the Somerville family who had been 'for nearly four hundred years lords of Linton' (Somerville 1815, 1: 38–46; Henderson 1879b, 296).¹⁷ Likewise, in *Notes* the similar story of the Lambton Worm is told, in which a wayward scion of the Lambton family returns from the crusades to fight a dragon that has grown from a 'worm of most unsightly appearance' that he had discarded whilst fishing in the Wear as a young man (Henderson 1879b, 288). In this case the story is taken from Cuthbert Sharp (1830, 1834), who in turn took it from the second volume of Robert Surtees's chronicle of Durham *The Histories and Antiquities of the County Palatinate of Durham* (1820, 171–72).

In the writings of the county chroniclers from which these stories are taken, such legends serve an important genealogical function for the landed aristocracy. The presumed antiquity of the stories is a guarantor of the antiquity of the family's lineage, and the conceit that the events of these ancient tales can still be seen inscribed on the landscapes is a symbol of an indelible right to ownership of that land.¹⁸ In both cases too, the stories have been assimilated into the heraldries of the families about which they are told, lending mythological credibility to the family's claims. But when Henderson reworks and republishes these heraldic legends, he does so in a very different context to that of his antiquarian sources. By the middle of the nineteenth

century, the authority that these country seats embodied had been considerably eroded: industrialization had shifted wealth and influence to a new bourgeois class, and urbanization had concentrated political power in the metropolis and weakened the local authority of aristocratic houses. Henderson is thus returning to these traditions at a point in time when the authority they represent is waning and being replaced by new forms of power and influence, and this lends poignancy to his treatment of them. He pays respect to these ancient family lineages and takes them seriously. Yet he tells the stories as folklore, not as part of the genealogical heraldry of a current family and the endorsement of an extant power. The story of the Worm of Linton, Henderson writes, lends the village of Linton considerable ‘charm’ (Henderson 1879a, 205), but charm is not power. Rather, it is a signifier that the time of this chivalric aristocracy is gone, and the period of industrial giants has arrived.

Henderson’s folklore, in other words, becomes a means of recording the pastness of both the popular superstitions of the masses and the genuine political authority of the landed aristocracy. In their place, what remains is the ascendant power of the conservative merchant class, bolstered by commerce and empire. Whilst *Notes* is never explicitly political, in this sense, it stands as a quiet affirmation of the viewpoint of Henderson’s class and beliefs.

Even as Henderson endeavours to present the materials he collects as remnants of a past that has been superseded, his own evidence repeatedly reveals the ways in which these traditions gain new relevance and significance in changing industrial contexts. For Henderson, industry and education were wiping away the practices he defines as ‘folklore’, but on many occasions in his work, he cites traditions that come to him from industrial contexts, where they continue to thrive. Two notable examples of this are to be found in the Yorkshire tales included in the appendix supplied to Henderson by Baring-Gould for the first edition of 1866. The tale ‘The Prophecy’ that appears as story eleven in the appendix to *Notes* was, as Baring-Gould records in a diary of 1865, told to him by a ‘railroad lad’ called James Shilton. Likewise the *cante-fable* ‘The Golden Ball’, recorded as tale ten in Henderson’s appendix—and the oldest known version of the story and ballad type ‘The Maid Freed from the Gallows’ in *cante-fable* form (Long 1971, 1)—was told to Baring-Gould by Sarah Ann Hirst, a ‘mill lass’ from West Riding in Yorkshire.¹⁹ This story, as recorded by Baring-Gould in his diary, centres upon two sisters who, while returning from a fair, meet ‘a right bonny young man’ with gold on his cap, gold on his finger, gold round his neck, and a redgold watchchain (‘Eh! But he had brass’—says the narrator).²⁰ This young man gives each of the sisters a golden ball to keep safe, and tells them that if they lose it they will be hanged. One of the girls loses her ball (‘how my informant would not say’, notes Baring-Gould) and so she is taken to be hanged. The hangman is about to carry out the sentence, but the girl stops him when she sees her mother arriving. She asks her mother whether she has found the golden ball and has come to set her free, but her mother replies in verse:

I’ve neither brought thy golden ball
Nor come to set thee free
But I have come to see thee hung
Upon this gallow-tree.

The hangman then endeavours to carry out the sentence, but is interrupted again by the arrival of the sister—with the same outcome. A third attempt is then made to hang the girl, but this time the ‘sweetheart’ arrives carrying the golden ball. The story ends with a verse exchange between the girl and her lover:

Stop, stop! I see my sweetheart coming,
Sweetheart hast’ brought my golden ball
And come to set me free!

Aye! I have brought thy golden ball
And come to set thee free
I am not come to see thee hung
Upon the gallows tree.

Baring-Gould reads the story as a solar myth, making the predictable interpretation of the golden ball, and argues, consistent with the Aryanist position, that the story is a fragment of ancient mythology derived from our primeval ancestors (Baring-Gould 1896, 287–88). But his account of the derivation of the story as noted in his diary tells another tale. Told by a young female mill hand in Yorkshire in the 1860s, we might see in this story a fantasy of escape from a life of poverty and drudgery by means of a bonny man who has ‘brass’. Equally, we might read the implied commentary upon an authoritarianism that would condemn a girl to death for a minor infringement, as an act of imaginative resistance to a dehumanizing and alienating economic situation. In these terms, the story recorded by Henderson and Baring-Gould may be seen not as a fiction that has ceased to be relevant in the modern context, but, on the contrary, as evidence of the continuing role played by popular storytelling in the negotiation of the shifting power structures brought about by industrialization.

Later Years

In 1871, five years after the publication of *Notes*, William withdrew from the family firm, and took up a position as partner in the firm of Messrs Brinton in Kidderminster. John Austin speculates that the split from the Henderson Carpet Manufacturing Company was not amicable and arose from political disagreements between the brothers (Austin 2001, 5). Throughout these years, Henderson’s fishing trips continued, as did his correspondence on matters of folklore, resulting in the revised and expanded edition of *Notes* published by The Folk-Lore Society in 1879.²¹ In this new edition, the appendix of stories from Sabine Baring-Gould has disappeared for reasons that are not made clear but possibly arise from the anomaly of having a number of stories from Devon included in a work on the North of England. In place of this collection of stories from Baring-Gould is a single story from Henderson that constitutes one of his most unique contributions to English traditional storytelling. Henderson records that the story had been communicated to him by the ropemaker turned artist Joseph Crawhall II (1821–96), having been ‘taken down from the lips of an old inhabitant of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne’ who had ‘known it all his life’ (Henderson 1879b, 349). ‘There can be little doubt’, Henderson observes

‘that it is an ancient tale of that place’ (Henderson 1879b, 349). The story concerns a young serving girl who, having broken a prohibition ‘never to put her brush up the chimney’ to clean it, discovers a concealed bag of money and makes off with it (Henderson 1879b, 349). As she flees the scene, she is asked for assistance by a gate that wishes to be opened, a cow that wants to be milked, and a mill that wants to be turned, but selfishly the girl refuses to help each of them, with the result that when her employer (an old woman) gives chase, the gate, the cow, and the mill readily reveal where the girl has gone and where she has hidden the bag of money. Having regained her money, the old woman hires a new girl, and delivers the same prohibition, which is again broken. On this occasion, however, the girl fleeing with the money agrees to the requests of the gate, the cow, and the mill with the result that they do not reveal her location when the employer gives chase, and she manages to escape with her loot. Again, this story, far from being a remnant of an obsolete tradition, seems to be of relevance to the context in which it is told. Like many folktales, it is a fantasy of escape from servitude and drudgery, and a celebration of the resourcefulness and ingenuity that it takes to enact the escape.

This story does not appear in any subsequent collection of British traditions prior to the digital archive of global narratives assembled by the American folklorist D. L. Ashliman between 1996 and 2024 (see Ashliman 2019), but for the quality and originality of the storytelling it is deserving of a more prominent place in the canon of traditional English folktales. Here is a story, apparently collected without significant adulteration, that shows a variant of the popular international tale-type of ‘The Kind and Unkind Girls’ (ATU 480) flourishing in the North East of England in the mid nineteenth century.

By 1891, the year of William Henderson’s death, he and his wife Lucy were living in St Mary Magdalen in Sussex with their daughter Gertrude. Henderson was seventy-eight years old. By this point, his family had become more dispersed. In 1884, his oldest daughter Lucy Durham Henderson, had emigrated to Quebec when her husband, John George Norton, was offered the post of rector at Christ Church Cathedral in Montreal. His seventh daughter, Julia Willmote Henderson (the writer mentioned earlier), also resettled in Canada at this time, probably having made the journey in her youth in the company of her elder sister. His eldest son, William Chipchase Henderson, who had served as Captain in the Eighty-Fifth King’s Light Infantry, had died relatively young in Edinburgh in 1885 (Austin 2001, 6).

At the time of Henderson’s death, it is probable that he knew about the publication of Joseph Jacobs’s *English Fairy Tales* (1890) and E. S. Hartland’s *English Fairy and Other Folk Tales* the year before, both of which drew liberally upon his earlier works and recognized, in notes and introductory materials, his significant contribution to folk narrative collection. Perhaps this knowledge justified Henderson’s observation to his children, made seventeen years before, that ‘the happiness of life depends far more upon the choice which young people make of the recreation from their leisure hours, than it does upon the profession or employment which comes to them in God’s good Providence’ (Henderson 1879a, 301). His profession had brought him wealth and political standing, but this wealth and political standing had given him the means to

make his mark in the fields he cared most passionately about, angling and folklore, where his legacy has been strongest.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- ¹ For information about the house, see ‘The Eden Family Townhouse’ on the St John’s College page of UNESCO’s Durham Castle and Cathedral site. Accessed 12 April 2025. <https://www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/learn/architecture/bailey/south-bailey/johns-college>.
- ² For a short biography online, see Ainley (2018). Henshaw’s first novel, *Hypnotized?, Or, The Experiment of Sir Hugh Galbraith: A Romance* (1898), was published under the pen name Julian Durham, Durham being her mother’s maiden name as well as the city of her birth. Her father’s influence is apparent in this book, which includes accounts of fishing the river Tweed and references to folklore collection.
- ³ Letter to Susanna Warren, 9 May 1861 (Mitchell et al. n.d.): <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge/1828/to-susanna-warren-4>.
- ⁴ Letter to Susanna Warren, 7 February 1861 (Mitchell et al. n.d.): <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge/14/to-susanna-warren-3>.
- ⁵ Letter to Susanna Warren, 9 May 1861 (Mitchell et al. n.d.): <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge/1828/to-susanna-warren-4>.
- ⁶ Letter to William Henderson, 10 December 1861 (Mitchell et al. n.d.): <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge/1848/to-the-reverend-william-george-hendersonfootnote1>. Note that in the digitized archive this letter is incorrectly identified as being sent to Rev. William George Henderson.
- ⁷ Henderson provides two different spellings of his informant’s name in his *Notes*. When he tells the story he credits it to ‘Mr Charles Wastell’, and in the introduction he thanks ‘Mr. C. Waistall’ of Cotherstone (Henderson 1879b, 242 and xi). Records do not exist for names in either of these spellings, but there was a solicitor from Cotherstone (and latterly Northallerton) by the name of Mr Charles Waistell (1836–1911) who seems the most likely supplier of this story.
- ⁸ I am very grateful to John Austin for sharing a photocopy of this with me in correspondence, and for subsequently checking the transcription of the letter. The volume in which the letter has been bound is *Notes on the Folklore of the North of England* (Henderson 1862a), currently housed in The Story Museum, Durham.
- ⁹ Letter to Susanna Warren, 9 May 1861 (Mitchell et al. n.d.): <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/yonge/1828/to-susanna-warren-4>.
- ¹⁰ It is notable that Warren was a highly accomplished writer, editor, and compiler in her own right, with a long bibliography of fictional and non-fictional works, including her popular compilation *Stories for Every Sunday in the Christian Year* (Warren 1862b), didactic novels such as *Jane Lowe, the Wise Woman, and the Seventh Son* (Warren 1862a), and manuals of household management such as *Directions for Cutting Out and Making Articles of Clothing* (Warren 1854). These accomplishments lend further credence to the notion that she played a major role in the collation and composition of *Notes*.
- ¹¹ *Notes and Queries* for 15 December 1866 carries a brief review in which Henderson’s volume is described as ‘well-timed and interesting’ (‘Notes on the Folk-Lore’ 1866, 486). One of the longer notices appears in an article titled ‘Superstitions and Legends of the North of England’ in the *Dublin University Magazine*. Here Henderson is identified as having a ‘genuine vocation to the office of folk-lore preservation’ (‘Superstitions and Legends’ 1867, 364).

- ¹² For an account of the history of the Wilkie manuscript, see J. Ferguson's introductory note in Wilkie (1916, 50–51). At the time of Wilkie's death in 1838, the traditions he collected for Scott were recorded in three small manuscript quartos. Only one of these survived, and this was subsequently published under the title 'Old Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Inhabitants of the Southern Counties of Scotland' by the Berwickshire Naturalist's Club in 1916 (Wilkie 1916). The work that Henderson possessed appears to have been the same as the volume later published as 'Old Rites', although it is not clear whether Henderson had the original manuscript version, or a transcript that had been made by one of the manuscript's owners (Dr Hardy) at some point in the 1860s.
- ¹³ For discussion of Henderson's use of Wilkie's work, see Smith (2018). Smith argues that although Henderson borrows extensively from Wilkie, the changes he makes interfere with accuracy, and in some cases there are errors in Henderson's account that arise from misunderstanding Border terms.
- ¹⁴ Of the narratives in this appendix, five of the stories had already been published by Baring-Gould the previous year in three instalments of *Notes and Queries* under the title 'Devonshire Household Stories' (see Baring-Gould 1865). The Yorkshire stories are published in Henderson's *Notes* for the first time.
- ¹⁵ Henderson identifies Sharp as the source of 'The Pelton Bragg' and the 'Lambton Worm' but does not cite him directly in relation to 'The Cauld Lad of Hilton'. However, the similarities in the text used by Sharp and Henderson, combined with the extensive use Henderson makes of Sharp throughout *Notes*, leaves little doubt that this is his source. It may be noted that Sharp had also published the story of *The Worme of Lambton* as a separate volume in 1830 (Sharp 1830). Robert Lambe's ballad, titled 'The Laidley Worm of Spindleston Heughs', was first published in Hutchinson (1778, 162–64). Lambe claimed that the verses were a discovery, and that they came from 'the old mountain-bard, Duncan Frasier, living on Cheviot, AD. 1270', but this is now regarded as a fabrication (see Rutherford 2012, 230 n.3).
- ¹⁶ The prose version of this story was used by Joseph Jacobs in *More English Fairy Tales* (1894), and has become the most commonly reproduced form of the narrative. Jacobs (1894, 221), and latterly Briggs (1970–71, part A, vol. 1: 282), cite Henderson and Baring-Gould as the source, but given the story's prior publication under Warren's initials, she seems to have been the original author.
- ¹⁷ *Memorie of the Somervilles* was completed in manuscript in 1679 and remained amongst the family papers until it was edited and published by Walter Scott in 1815.
- ¹⁸ See Rosemary Sweet for an account of this function of the county history, which 'demonstrated the historical longevity of the gentry class, and was the natural medium through which the legitimacy of the place of the landed gentry in society could be asserted' (Sweet 2004, 36).
- ¹⁹ See Diary of the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, with hymns, poems, and stories, 1862–67 in the Sabine Baring-Gould Archive at the Devon Records Office, reference 5203M, acc: 7742. This diary includes full handwritten transcripts of three of the stories that appear in Henderson's appendix: the two mentioned here and story twelve, the 'Lying Tale', which Baring-Gould identifies as having been told by a chorister named Joe Wilson. This volume appears to have been used as an irregular notebook from Christmas 1862 to 1867. The last date provided prior to the handwritten transcript of these stories is 20 February 1865.
- ²⁰ Baring-Gould admitted to producing a composite version of the story for publication, importing elements into a tale he had been told from another story (Henderson 1866, 239) and also drawing on his own memories of a chapbook narrative (Baring-Gould 1896, 287). In the appendix to *Notes*, the imported elements are indicated with square brackets, but these were removed when Jacobs republished the story in *More English Fairy Tales* (1894). See Long (1971, 135 n.23). The original story that Baring-Gould was told, recorded in his diary, is a more direct, less cluttered, and altogether more forceful piece of popular fiction.
- ²¹ Henderson had prepared this edition for another publishing house, but on discovering the potential interest of The Folk-Lore Society, wrote a letter to its Council on 14 February 1879 proposing publication 'under the auspices and for the benefit of the Folk Lore Society' and offering to 'guarantee the Society against loss—to the extent of one hundred pounds'. This proposal was considered at a Council meeting of 28 February and unanimously agreed. The Council's deliberations and Henderson's letter can be found in The Folklore Society Council Minute Book for 1879, University College London Special Collections, Box T173.

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