

FOAFTALE NEWS
NEWSLETTER
OF
THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY LEGEND RESEARCH

No. 74

January 2010

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Reminder: Membership Renewal

was never any question about who was in charge. It was George Bush. And that's the way [they] operated. This whole notion that somehow [he] exceeded his authority here, was usurping [Bush's] authority, is simply not true. It's an urban legend, never happened." Dowd notes that later Cheney "[put] all the blame for all the messes squarely on W... Even on his way out, Vice is still on top." Dowd's quote from Cheney reflects one of the current glosses of the term "urban legend." In this issue you will find an excellent essay by Sandy Hobbs, "Scholarly Use of the Term 'Urban Legend.'"

This issue also contains an intriguing essay about a "vanishing hitchhiker" legend by Mark Henderson. Dialogue on this subject (as on all other legend-related topics) would be very welcome.

I want to thank everyone who has sent helpful information and contributions during the past year, especially Jan Brunvand and Véronique Campion-Vincent. Eda Kalmre has been a wonderful webmaster. With the help of Theo Meder, abstracts and a program of the upcoming Amsterdam meeting will appear in the next newsletter. Please consider sending an essay, a book review, or another contribution for the newsletter's next issue. Thank you!

Elizabeth (Libby) Tucker

From the Editor

As the new year begins, I want to wish all my fellow ISCLR members a joyful and productive year. I'm looking forward to our annual meeting in Amsterdam in June/July and hope to see you there.

This issue of *FOAftale News* includes three important motions upon which we voted at the annual meeting in Baddeck last summer, as well as the minutes of that meeting. Thanks go to Elissa Henken for providing both documents.

Last winter, Jan Brunvand sent me a quotation from United States Vice-President Dick Cheney that had appeared in Maureen Dowd's *New York Times* column of January 11, 2009. According to Dowd, Cheney "protested the notion that somehow [he] was pulling strings or making presidential-level decisions. [He] was not. There

**Perspectives on Contemporary Legend
International Society for Contemporary Legend
Research
Twenty-eighth International Conference
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
June 28 – July 1, 2010**

The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research is pleased to announce that the 2010 Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Twenty-eighth International Conference is to be held at the Meertens Instituut in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Proposals for papers on all aspects of 'contemporary', 'urban', or 'modern' legend research are sought, as are those on any legend or legend-like tradition that circulate actively at present or have circulated at an earlier historical period. Previous discussions have ranged in

focus from the ancient to the modern (including Internet-lore) and have covered diverse cultures worldwide (including our own academic world).

The 2010 meeting will be organized as a series of seminars at which the majority of those who attend will present papers and/or contribute to discussion sessions. Concurrent sessions will be avoided so that all participants can hear all the papers. Proposals for special panels of papers, discussion sessions and other related events are encouraged.

To participate in the conference, please fax us your registration form, and mail us your title and abstract (250-300 words) by **February 1st 2010**. Fax and e-mail addresses of the organizers can be found below.

Registration fee will be

- for ISCLR members
60 euros or
90 US dollars
- for non-ISCLR members
90 euros or
135 US dollars

For further questions, information or travel advice, please contact:

| Abstracts, information on papers | Practical information, travel advice |
|---|---|
| Theo Meder | Hetty Garcia |
| Meertens Instituut | Meertens Instituut |
| Joan Muyskenweg 25 | Joan Muyskenweg 25 |
| 1096 CJ Amsterdam | 1096 CJ Amsterdam |
| The Netherlands | The Netherlands |
| Office Phone: +31 20 4628 558 | Office Phone: +31 20 4628 540 |
| Office Fax: +31 20 4628 555 | Office Fax: +31 20 4628 555 |
| E-mail: theo.meder@meertens.knaw.nl | E-mail: hetty.garcia@meertens.knaw.nl |

The registration form, including the possibility for hotel reservation, as well as more elaborate information can be found on this website:

www.meertens.knaw.nl/isclr2010

Hotel, conference location and travel

The recommended hotel, just seven minutes of walking distance from the Meertens, is the Mercure Hotel: <http://www.mercure.com/gb/hotel-1244-mercure-hotel-amsterdam-aan-de-amstel/index.shtml> (see Map and Directions). If you want to stay at the Mercure Hotel, please let us know in the registration form, and we will book your room. The hotel can be reached from Schiphol Airport by train and subway. Travel by taxi is more comfortable, but more expensive as well. For the location of the conference see: Meertens Instituut: <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl> (see Contact).

Motions Approved at the ISCLR Annual General Meeting, June 6, 2009

The following motions were approved unanimously at the Annual General meeting. The first two had come from the Executive Council, and the third came from members. They are now open to consideration by the full membership. All members who have not already voted at the AGM have six months from the time of this posting to indicate dissent. Please read each amendment and transmit your concerns to ISCLR Secretary Elissa R. Henken at ehenken@uga.edu.

If approved, the changes in #1 and #2 will take effect in two years at the 2011 AGM, and the change in #3 will take effect in one year at the 2010 AGM.

Motion 1.

ISCLR Executive Council will include the following officers: President, **President Elect, Past President**, Secretary, Treasurer, two Members at Large (European), two Members at Large (North American), Editor of Contemporary Legend, Editor of FOAFTale News, and Webmaster.

Portion in boldface replaces: First Vice President, Second Vice President

Rationale: Past President is currently Second Vice President. These changes are proposed to create a progression through our senior officers to ensure access to institutional memory, experience, and necessary skills.

Motion 2.

By-Law 5.2 shall read:

Members of the council shall be elected at the general meeting. **Officers of the society will normally serve terms of three years. These terms will be staggered in the following pattern. Year one will include the election of the President, who will become President Elect, and will result in the current President Elect becoming President and the current President becoming Past President. Year two will include elections of Secretary, Treasurer, one Member at Large (European), and one Member at Large (North American). Year three will include elections of the remaining Members at Large.** The editors of Contemporary Legend, FOAFTale News, and Webmaster will be appointed by Council and serve terms of a length determined by Council.

Portion in boldface replaces: Officers of the society will normally serve terms of four years, with the exception of the President and Second Vice President, who will serve terms of two years.

Rationale: The current system of two-year terms for senior officers does not allow the time needed both to learn and to develop the role. Terms are being equalized and staggered to streamline the process and ensure regular turnover.

Motion 3:

We move that an additional position be added to Council in a regular voting capacity for Member at Large (Early Career Scholar).

Rationale: To ensure the involvement of our less established members and to ensure a regular injection of "new blood" into the running of the society.

**Minutes of ISCLR Annual General Meeting
June 6, 2009
Baddeck, Nova Scotia**

President Cathy Preston called the meeting to order at 2:35 pm.

Preston extended thanks on behalf of the society to Ian Brodie for having hosted such a fine conference. Preston handed Brodie gifts from the society. Brodie, in turn, thanked those at Cape Breton University and the Centre for Cape Breton Studies who had given their support to the conference.

Council Reports

President: Preston reported that we have lost Bill Ellis as Webmaster, but have appointed Brodie in his place.

Treasurer: Preston presented the report on behalf of Treasurer Paul Smith.

| | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Bank | \$7894.92 Canadian |
| MUN Printing Account | 1895.74 |

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Sub Total | \$9790.66 |
|-----------|-----------|

Upcoming expenses for CL8:

| | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Typing | \$1128.80 |
| Printing (approx) | 1000.00 |
| Postage | 350.00 |

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Sub Total | \$2478.80 |
|-----------|-----------|

Anticipated Grand total: \$7311.86

\$600 has already been paid toward the conference.

Membership Secretary: Elissa R. Henken reported that, while due to the transition from one Membership secretary to another numbers are not precise, membership for 2009 is way down from previous years. She encouraged all present to join.

Contemporary Legend: Mikel Koven reported that CL8 (2006) is printed and awaiting posting. CL9 (2007, on ghostlore) and CL10 (2008) are almost full. CL 10 has 5 items and room for one or two more. CL11 (2009) is on

the theme of Web Legends and CL12 (2010) will be a regular issue. Koven made a plea that people send in papers, with a deadline of December 2009. He expects to be caught up by the end of 2010.

Lynne McNeill is the new Book Review Editor and members should have their publishers send books to her for review.

CL will publish advertisements for ISCLR members' books on legends free of charge, but must receive camera ready artwork without too much text (which can become illegible when reduced to half of an A1 sheet).

FOAFTale News: Elizabeth Tucker commented on what a pleasure it had been getting in touch with fellow folklorists through the Newsletter. The first issue had a disproportionate number of articles written by Tucker, but since then she has found several others to contribute. Eda Kalmre has been very helpful in putting it up on the Web. Tucker is planning for three issue per year: one for the conference, one in late summer, and one in winter. Veronique Campion-Vincent has already helped with 8 book reviews. It is very helpful to see what scholars in other countries are doing.

Brian McConnell Book Award: Preston reported it is not being given this year.

Buchan Award: Diane Goldstein reported on behalf of Smith that students who present at the meeting are automatically eligible for the prize, but that students may also submit papers simply by sending them to Smith. Smith's being away while the University changed his e-mail password has meant that we do not currently have access to any submitted papers. Therefore, selection of a winner has to be postponed until all papers can be considered. [The committee has subsequently announced that the 2009 award went to Virginia Fugarino for her paper "I (Don't) Like Ike: Post-Hurricane Legends in Electronic Discussion."]

Thanks: Preston expressed thanks to everyone on the Council who has helped in this past year, to Libby Tucker and Eda Kalmre for jumping in and keeping everything going, and to the outgoing members of the Council: Henrick Lassen, Sylvia Grider, Bill Ellis, and Diane Goldstein.

Election of Officers:

Preston explained that ISCLR is in an awkward transition period, when there are not enough people with both experience and institutional memory willing and able to fill positions. The Council had tried to find people to take on the officers' position. None are willing now, but people will be ready in two years. For those reasons, the Council had asked Preston to stand for election for one more term and Goldstein to remain as Second Vice President also for one more term.

Slate offered by Council:

President: Cathy Preston

First Vice President: Mikel Koven

Member at Large (European): Eda Kalmre

Member at Large (North American): Bill Ellis

In each case Preston called for nominations from the floor; there were none and the Council's nominee was put

forward. Each was elected unanimously by a show of hands.

Setting of Annual Subscription Rate: Council suggested not raising it at this time. It had been raised at the Logan meeting.

Future Conference Dates and Locations:

2010 Amsterdam, hosted by Theo Meder and Peter Burger

2011 Hershey/Harrisburg, PA, hosted by Yvonne Milspaw
2012 At the Dublin meeting, we had agreed on Gottingen, to be hosted by Christine Shojael Kawan. However Bodil Nildin-Wall has invited us to Upsala and, due to retirement, won't be able to host us after 2012. The Council needs to contact Shojael Kawan and see if she's willing to postpone her conference by two years.

2013 Preston and Goldstein have suggested returning to San Antonio. They could organize the program from a distance, while Grider and Carl Lindahl might be prevailed upon to arrange trips to local legend sites of the Alamo and railroad tracks. San Antonio in 2013 was approved unanimously by hand vote.

[After the meeting, Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby offered Lexington, Kentucky for 2013 or 2015.]

Amendments to the By-Laws: Henken presented 3 amendments.

1. Motion of Executive Council

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exception of the President and Second Vice President, who will serve terms of two years.

Rationale: The current system of two-year terms for senior officers does not allow the time needed both to learn and to develop the role. Terms are being equalized and staggered to streamline the process and ensure regular turnover.

Discussion and vote: Preston stressed concern about preservation of institutional memory and the difficulty of looking for a President every two years. These changes would help stabilize the institution. By hand votes, amendments 1 and 2 were each passed unanimously. If approved, these changes will take effect in two years at the 2011 AGM.

3. Members' motion (brought by Goldstein, Henken, and Preston):

We move that an additional position be added to Council in a regular voting capacity for Member at Large (Young Scholar).

Rationale: To ensure the involvement of our younger members and to ensure a regular injection of "new blood" into the running of the society.

Discussion: After objections to the ageism of the term "Young Scholar," the term was changed by friendly amendment to "Early Career Scholar." The rationale remained a desire to move new people into the Executive Council, involving and training some of the less-established members. The altered amendment was accepted unanimously by a hand vote. If approved, this change will take effect in one year at the 2010 AGM.

Date of next General meeting: The next Annual General Meeting will be held in Amsterdam on whatever dates are set for that.

Thanks: Preston thanked Jodi McDavid for having arranged lobster in season. Brodie opened the gifts (a paper-cutting by Yvonne Milspaw and a glass bowl) earlier presented to him.

Adjournment: Preston adjourned the meeting at 3:30 pm.

Respectfully submitted by
Elissa R. Henken
Secretary

Scholarly Use of the Term "Urban Legend" Sandy Hobbs

In recent issues of *Foafale News*, Jan Harold Brunvand has drawn our attention to the use of "urban legend" and "urban myth" in political discourse (Brunvand, 2007a) and in crosswords and comics (Brunvand, 2007b). I would suggest that these terms are even more widespread than he has indicated.

I recently did a Google search for "urban legend" and "contemporary legend." The result strongly indicates that, although when we founded the society we chose the name "contemporary legend," to the world at large "urban

legend" is much more common. There were 17,300 hits for "contemporary legend", but 1,980,000 for "urban legend," in other words, more than a hundred times as many. I suspect that, although Brunvand did not invent the latter term, his use of it in his many popular books must have played a part in establishing it in the minds of non-specialists. Of course, making a term familiar and controlling its use are rather different things, so it is not entirely surprising to find it used, as he says, to mean "not true" or "not completely true" or "just rumor or hearsay."

Can we expect the scholarly community to employ "urban legend" more precisely? I decided to explore this question by searching for "urban legend" on the Scholar Google site. My conclusion is that the phrase is becoming quite widely used in academic publications to mean "not true." I looked in detail at the first 24 articles or books listed which had "urban legend" (UL) or "contemporary legend" (CL) in the title. Exactly half of them were clearly dealing with legends in a sense familiar to members of our society. These included 11 works employing UL, several being works by Brunvand himself. The sole example of CL in a title was Gary Alan Fine's *Manufacturing Tales* (1992).

That many of the remainder were using UL more loosely can be seen in the fact that some of them deal with fields such as medicine, economic and politics. One need not go beyond the titles in most cases to understand how UL is being used. For example, the title "Method variance in organizational research: truth or urban legend" (Spector, 2006) indicates that "urban legend" here is used as a contrast to "truth." This is also the case with a title such as "The golden hour: scientific fact or medical "urban legend" (Lerner & Moscati, 2001). In some cases it is not clear from the title itself how the term is being used, for example, "The allegedly simple structure of experts' risk perception: An urban legend in risk perception" (Sjoberg, 2002). However, an examination of the text makes it clear that here too, UL is used as synonymous with "false."

There are a couple of cases where the use of the term may be regarded as somewhat more than merely colloquial. For example, a paper entitled "The transmission and persistence of 'urban legends': Sociological application of age-structured epidemic models" (Noymer, 2001) offers a mathematical model which might be applied to rumors or legends, although no actual legends are invoked to test the model.

When I searched Scholar Google for "contemporary legend," the outcome was rather different. The first 24 articles or books listed were all utilizing that phrase in the sense that legend scholars employ. In fact almost all were by legend scholars with whom I was already familiar. We may sum the situation up thus. Most scholars in fields other than ours are probably unaware of the use of the term "contemporary legend." In contrast they are aware of the term "urban legend" but in general do not treat it as a technical term.

What implications, if any, does this have for members of our society? The most obvious lesson is that we have clearly failed to establish ourselves as students of a coherent and acknowledged set of phenomena. However,

beyond that there are issues of strategy which need to be addressed.

Should we challenge fellow scholars who use the term UL loosely? It is unlikely that we would have much effect if we challenged cartoonists or politicians, but scholars in other fields might be more likely to take a complaint seriously. Another possibility is that we might simply abandon UL to the common usage which seems to have developed and employ "contemporary legend" as a technical term.

Finally, there is the question of "myth." Jan Brunvand in FN 69 refers to the general public employing the term urban legend or "sometimes, unfortunately, urban myth." Google and Scholar Google searches throw up many examples of "urban myth" and some of "contemporary myth," though many fewer than UL and CL. But why should we regard these as particularly unfortunate? "Myth" may be used rather differently from how folklorists have traditionally employed the term, but we can hardly complain about new meanings developing. After all "urban legends" are not exclusively "urban" in their circulation and wasn't a "legend" at one time something which was written down? I am inclined to suggest that, when dealing with contemporary folklore, "legend" and "myth" could be usefully employed to distinguish between a narrative (legend) and a "fact-like" statement not involving narrative (myth).

References

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A Venerable Precedent for a Contemporary Legend?

Mark Henderson

Dr Jacqueline Simpson (U.K.) suggested that I write to you. During recent correspondence with her, I mentioned a tale that I've heard in the Peak District of Derbyshire, England, which is very similar to the now-ubiquitous

motorcycle-and-vanishing-hitchhiker story but set in an earlier time. She thought you might be interested in the putative connection.

I'm sure all your readers know at least one variant of the contemporary legend. (At least one variant circulates in the Peak District.) Briefly, a male motor cyclist is travelling alone, usually at night, when a lone female hitch-hiker attracts his attention. She seems to be in distress and wishes to be taken home. He obligingly places her on the pillion of his bike and drives away. Some time later, e.g. when her alleged destination is reached, he turns to speak to her but she's no longer there. Greatly alarmed, he retraces his route but there's no sign of her, or of any emergency service summoned to her aid. It subsequently transpires that she was killed in a motor-cycle accident on that same stretch of road some time previously.

The story I heard some 4-5 years ago from a resident of Milldale, a village in the Derbyshire Peak District, is set in an earlier century. One moonlit night, a lone horseman was riding along a deserted stretch of road when he heard a woman sobbing and moaning. He stopped to investigate, and found the distressed damsel weeping, wringing her hands and barely articulate. He managed to establish that her home lay in the direction in which he was travelling, then he lifted her on to the back of his horse and set off again at a gentle trot. Some time later he reached a junction, turned round to ask whether he should go left or right, and found no one behind him. He rode back along the route he'd taken, but to no avail. He searched that stretch of road all the rest of the night, calling to the lady, but there was neither sight nor sound of her, and he never saw her again.

There was no 'punch-line' to this oral narrative - no "she fell from a horse on that stretch of road some time previously and was killed", or anything of the kind - and no explanation for the woman's distress. However, the family resemblance to the contemporary motorcycle legend seems obvious. Dr Simpson suggested that rather than a precedent for the contemporary legend, the story I heard might be a "back-formation" - a pseudo-precursor invented to add a romantic and faux-historical gloss to a well-known modern tale. In either case, she agrees with me that the comparison is interesting. I hope you and your readers may agree.

REMINDER

Now would be a good time to check whether your membership is up-to-date. To renew your membership, send a check made out to "ISCLR" for US\$40.00, UK£20, CAN \$42.50, or E30 to Elissa R. Henken, Department of English, Park Hall, Athens, GA 30602, U.S.A. Elissa's new e-mail address is: ehenken@uga.edu
Thanks very much for your support of ISCLR!

FOAFtale News (FTN) is the newsletter of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. We study "modern" and "urban" legends, and also any legend circulating actively. To join, send a cheque made out to "ISCLR" for US\$40.00 or UK£20 to Mikel J. Koven, AHSS, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK. Institutional rates available upon request. Members also receive **Contemporary Legend**, a refereed academic journal. Some back issues of **FTN** are available on-line at <http://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale>.

FOAFtale News is indexed in the MLA Bibliography.

This newsletter is called **FOAFtale News** for the jocular term current among legend scholars for over twenty years. The term "foaf" was introduced by Rodney Dale (in his 1978 book, *The Tumour in the Whale*) for an oft-attributed but anonymous source of contemporary legends: a "friend of a friend." Dale pointed out that contemporary legends always seemed to be about someone just two or three steps from the teller — a boyfriend's cousin, a co-worker's aunt, or a neighbor of the teller's mechanic. "Foaf" became a popular term at the Sheffield legend conferences in the 1980s. It was only a short step to the pun "foaftale," a step taken by a yet-anonymous wag.

The opinions expressed in **FOAFtale News** are those of the authors and do not in any necessary way represent those of the editor, the contributors, the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, its Council, or its members.

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ISCLR website <http://www2.hn.pau.edu>

ISSN 1026-1001

CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME!

*Please send contributions to
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