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# Jubilee of Emily Lyle

On December 19, Dr Emily Lyle, Honorary Fellow at the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, in the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh, celebrated her ninetieth birthday. Emily is a prominent folklorist, a researcher of ritual calendars, myths, astronomy, and cosmology, a semiotician and a typologist, a connoisseur of Scottish folklore and culture, just to mention a few of her fields of interest.

Emily Lyle at the conference of the SIEF Ritual Year Working Group, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2006. Photograph by Andres Kuperjanov. Personal archive.

To honour this outstanding scholar, who founded the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) Ritual Year Working Group in 2004, the members of this academic community would like to share their reminiscences of Emily, along with a few words of homage and gratitude.

## Irina Sedakova, Moscow, Russia

During the last two decades, Emily Lyle has been one of the most significant people in my academic life and activities. We first met in Edinburgh at a conference of the SIEF Working Group on Folk Religion in 1996, but it was not until 2003, at a conference of the Traditional Cosmological Society (the TCS, earlier founded by Emily Lyle in 1984) at the University of Edinburgh, that we became better acquainted. Emily came up with the idea of establishing a new international working group on the ritual year, which would be affiliated with SIEF. Emily invited several participants of the TCS conference to discuss her ideas for the official establishment of this working group at the 7th SIEF Congress due to take place in April 2004 in Marseilles. The late George Mifsud Chircop presented this idea at the SIEF general meeting, and the group was then officially approved and established. I was invited by Emily to become the

secretary of the group, and I was lucky to hold this position and to frequently communicate with Emily with regard to the working group for the next ten years.

In March 2005, the first conference of the Ritual Year Working Group took place in a very symbolic setting – Malta, a crossroads of various cultures and languages – and this can be said to have set us on course for the exquisite route taken by the working group over the next thirteen conferences: in Gothenburg (2006), Strážnice (2007), Cork (2008), Kaunas (2009), Tallinn (2010), Ljubljana (2011), Plovdiv (2012), Szeged (2013), Innsbruck (2014), Kazan (2015), Findhorn (2016), Bucharest (2018), and Riga (2022). Emily was at the centre of all these meetings. Even when she was not physically able to join the group in the last few years, her positive attitude to the presenters and to the studies of other scholars has permeated the air of the seminars. She set the pole high, always encouraging a lively, friendly, yet demanding level of discussion, her superior sense of humour helping to create an attentive, yet informal atmosphere. Emily encouraged all of us to speak and to write in English (including those of us who came from the post-Soviet countries), something which, at the beginning, may well have been painful for her (and other native speakers). Nonetheless, step by step, conference after conference, publication after publication, our "East European English" language and our comprehension have improved. This was definitely an immense service to us provided by Emily, who patiently listened to our papers and then went on to correct hundreds of poorly written pages for the yearbook issued by the working group.

For many colleagues, and not least for myself, Emily became both a Teacher and a Guide. She has a talent for sensing what might be interesting to you personally and where you have potential. Having defended my PhD thesis which was an ethnolinguistic study of Bulgarian winter folk customs, I had thought that I would not get stuck in the ritual calendar and planned to research another topic (which I went on to do for my second, doctoral degree on childbirth lore). However, thanks to Emily and thanks to my work as the secretary of the Ritual Year Working Group I found myself going back to the calendar, learning about so many new traditions, methodologies, approaches and ideas, combining all of these new acquisitions with my expertise on the Slavic and Balkan languages and folk cultures.

In 2004, the Traditional Cosmological Society (probably on Emily's recommendation) granted me with a scholarship, which allowed me to stay with Emily

for one month in Edinburgh. It was here that I discovered Emily's hospitality, her attentive guidance and tact, not to mention the fact that this gave me the great opportunity to work in the Scottish archives and libraries which opened up a number of new perspectives for me. Emily then visited Moscow and gave an astounding talk on mythology at the Institute of Slavic Studies, in the Russian Academy of Sciences. Indeed, Emily's academic lectures have become legendary for their structured and vibrant nature; she also came to be seen as a PowerPoint genius at a very early point.

All in all, I feel so indebted to Emily. My gratitude to her is immense, and my birthday wishes both sincere and from the heart.

## Mare Kõiva, Tartu, Estonia

Emily arrived in Estonia for the first time at the very beginning of the twenty-first century, at a time when I was hesitating with regard to how I should proceed with my study of mythology and mythical matter. It seemed that, in addition to those approaches based on a highly formalized theoretical construction, there must be other possibilities that would help me understand the adaptability of mythical motifs and the surprising connections that these have with today's culture. I had looked at the approaches of mythological researchers such as Jaan Puhvel and others and the writings by Vladimir Toporov and Vyacheslav Ivanov and had read all kinds of professional literature – literally metres of theory had been written. It was at this moment that Emily Lyle made a sudden visit to Estonia, coming from Finland where she had been at a conference. She gave a lecture at the Estonian Literary Museum which was built on Georges Dumézil's approach but involved Emily's own creative development, a blend of both the general and the abstract, accompanied by some highly proficient computer graphics.

We took a trip to Setomaa, looked at the monument to the Mother of Song and a number of other things on the way. I think for some reason that we had a conversation about nationality, something that would continue to be a hot topic for both the Setos and the Estonians. Emily had a good overview of the problems that existed in the UK, Scotland, and Australia, as well as a number of other perspectives. In the evening, we bravely headed down to the basement restaurant near the library of the University of Tartu to eat. Maybe a year later, thinking back on our trip, continued to wonder with a great deal of admiration

how Emily had managed to rush around with us at the same pace, joining in everything with us, always asking questions. I think we saw Emily as being the same age as us, perhaps because of her eternally young soul.

When I arrived late at the founding conference of the Ritual Year Working Group in 2004 – as a well-known Estonian classic of youth says – "by that time the event had ended" – I encountered nothing other than enthusiastic colleagues. I was still very fond of mythology, and in Edinburgh, we talked about plans for the Ritual Year Working Group, discussing at length with Irina Sedakova what should be done in our science. My travelling soul led to me taking a backpacker trip to see Scotland. We were a motley company: in addition to families, the bus was full of swords and role-players, reproducers of mythology, and at each stop and at each castle, a new battle unfolded, as those present perfected stories with a background in the history of Scotland, tracing the paths of Robin Hood, and more. The community that was housed in the School of Scottish Studies was friendly, and the library held wonderful prints going back many centuries. On one of my final days in Edinburgh, in Holyrood Park, near Arthur's Seat, the joy of working with people who revel in meeting researchers of rituals from Europe, America, and other parts of the world, practitioners of new religious phenomena really began to sink in. This was not so much about the content of the archives, but rather the analysis that could be carried out based on the experience of the scientist. Collaboration with the Ritual Year Working Group has been an instructive journey – not least because of the contact with living researchers, such as Emily.

Emily's lecture in the Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia on 2 April 2007 was received by a full audience. The announcement had invited people to a seminar in the Estonian Centre for Cultural History and Folkloristics (the first Estonian Centre of Excellence in the Humanities), at which Emily Lyle from School of Scottish Studies was going to speak about "Understanding and Portraying the Structure of the Ritual Year". The presentation in question went on to deal with several ideas about the rituals of the annual cycle that have parallels with the cycle of life, showing the shape of the year was based on three polar oppositions: (a) summer vs. winter; (b) the period between midsummer and midwinter vs. midwinter vs. midsummer; (c) most of the year vs. the short period of destruction. The relationship between different systems, such as the Julian and Gregorian calendars, was also briefly touched upon.

I read from my notes that Emily Lyle, Liisa Vesik, and Andres Kuperjanov then discussed the creation of a database relating to the dynamics of the European calendar tradition.

Emily has always been up to date on current events, and so at one of our meetings, she suggested that why don't we start using cogs as the logo for our scientific publishing house. Archaeologists had just discovered a thirteenth-century watercraft. A boat and a ship have a wide range of meanings as symbols, so the idea of a ship as a logo seemed like a nice one. But the director at the time didn't like it. When he soon left to sail around the world on a modern sailboat, his opposition became more understandable. Likely, the proposed craft had seemed too small and old-fashioned for him. Today, four directors and fifteen years later, there is good reason to return to the idea, and I hope that our publishing house's products carrying the new logo will be in front of you in 2023.

Emily later went on to participate in the Sixth International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year held on June 4–7, 2010, which dealt with "The Inner and the Outer". This was held in the premises of the EELK Institute of Religious Studies, right in the middle of the medieval city of Tallinn.

I have also met Emily at the regular gatherings of the Society of Comparative Mythology where she has demonstrated that she is still working at a high theoretical level. When COVID struck, we also became used to seeing Emily online, still demonstrating that she is the ideal embodiment of PowerPoint.

Alongside her conference work, Emily has managed to edit *Cosmos* journal and to publish Scottish ballads (in works like *Fairies and Folk: Approaches to the Scottish Ballad Tradition* from 2007) and has kindly given our library a number of publications. Her research on fairy ballads like "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tam Lin", especially when considered in the context of traditional beliefs and Scottish culture from the Middle Ages up to the present day are indispensable, and not least when one is dealing with Estonian fairies.

It has been a great pleasure to have experienced Emily's good humour and kind attitude.

## Terry Gunnell, Reykjavík, Iceland

I met Emily Lyle for the first time when I took my first sabbatical to the University of Edinburgh in the spring of 2001. Emily was one of the first people I was introduced to, in her book-filled office on the top floor of the School of

Scottish Studies in George Square. She was one of those luckily gifted with a view of Arthur's Seat from her window. The immediate reason for our being introduced was because we had a shared interest in folk drama and disguise traditions, all of which were closely related to the ritual year. Emily had been working on the Scottish Galoshins traditions, and I was interested in guising traditions from Shetland.

We immediately hit it off, and over the course of our regular conversations in Emily's office and in the tea-room in the basement of the building, I gradually became aware of her other numerous skills and abilities. In addition to being a thoroughly wonderful person, Emily was evidently a born teacher, regularly praised by students and fellow teachers and researchers for the way in which she both inspired and encouraged her students at all levels. Far from being limited to her interests in the ritual year, she was also an internationally respected ballad scholar, and like me, interested in ancient religions and cosmology. It was also clear that while Scotland was always close to her heart, she was an internationalist *par excellence*, with a wide range of contacts all round the world that was growing by the year. A gifted lecturer, her performance skills were clearly not limited to personal presence. She was also a genius at PowerPoint before anyone else started using it. I remember joining Gary West and Neill Martin, our mouths agape as we watched her colourful, animated visual presentations that put the rest of us to shame. Perhaps most amazing, though, was Emily's physical agility. Watching the speed at which she would quickly ascend stairs from the tea-room to her top-floor office often made me wonder whether she had an element of mountain goat in her makeup. All in all, here we had a total folklorist in heart and soul… someone we would all wish to emulate.

Our initial contact led to me writing two articles for *Cosmos*, and to Emily writing an article about Galoshins for our *Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Countries* (2007), and to my being taken into the organising committee of the Ritual Year Working Group when it started, as a Treasurer, a slightly odd position to be given since I know almost nothing about book-keeping. This nonetheless reflects another of Emily's innate talents. You would have a conversation with her and leave the room having agreed to become Prime Minister of Scotland and to bake pancakes for a party of 200 foreign visitors – without any memory of exactly where these jobs had been mentioned in the prior conversation. Indeed, as we all know, Emily has some very special charming powers of persuasion.

Our friendship has continued over the years as we have met up at a range of conferences around the world, where I have observed the ever-young Emily constantly quickly adapting to new surroundings. My respect for her has grown consistently, and I always look forward to discussing cosmology with her over a glass of wine. All in all, I am eternally grateful to have had Emily as a friend, colleague, and mentor. As we all know, there can only ever be one Emily, a godsend to all of us, who should rightly be regarded as the "Big Mama" of our ritual year family.

## Žilvytis Šaknys, Vilnius, Lithuania

I first met Emily Lyle when she made her first visit to the Institute of Lithuanian History twenty years ago. At that time, foreign ethnologists of Lithuanian origin or foreign ethnologists from neighbouring nations were the only ones to visit the Department of Ethnology (now the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology) of the Lithuanian Institute of History, usually in order to familiarize themselves with ethnographic materials. How surprised we were that a Scottish scholar of non-Lithuanian origin was interested in the cultural heritage of our nation. We were immediately attracted by the attitude of this famous ethnologist and folklorist, who showed no pride in what she had done. This was a simple, modest, friendly woman, who was burning with the desire to learn as much as possible about the calendar customs and mythology of our nation. In congratulating our dear Emily Lyle on her birthday, I would also like to draw attention to another aspect of her value for Lithuanian ethnology. The birth of the SIEF Ritual Year Working Group, the Ritual Year conferences, and the articles published in the Yearbooks of the Ritual Year Working Group have probably had even greater significance for Lithuania, than they have had for many other countries. The relatively limited number of studies of Lithuanian calendar customs in the twentieth century (except for the last decade), was leading to Lithuanian ethnologists paying special attention to this group. The fifth Ritual Year conference in Kaunas, at the Vytautas the Great University (organized by Arūnas Vaicekauskas), which took place in 2009, was very significant for Lithuania and encouraged Lithuanian students to start analyzing the topic of the ritual year, something which resulted in as many as ten Lithuanian ethnologists giving presentations live and online at the 14th SIEF Ritual Year Working Group conference in Riga in 2022. On behalf of all Lithuanian

ethnologists and folklorists, I would thus like to express my sincerely thanks to Emily Lyle for the work she has done for us and to wish her health, energy, and an enduring good mood, looking forward to seeing new great work in the future.

## Laurent S. Fournier, Nice, France

When I first met Emily Lyle in 2004, I was barely thirty years old. I had completed my PhD in Cultural Anthropology on the festive rituals of the south of France and had just obtained my first tenured teaching position in a faculty of sports sciences in Nantes, France. Emily asked me if I was familiar with the Kirkwall ba' game, a traditional game I have talked about several times in our seminars, and she said it would be nice if I could investigate the practice. I did not know then that it would keep me busy for more than ten years, and that it would contribute to building my scientific career in depth. To put it simply, she had put me on the path of research that would allow me to reconcile my interest as a researcher on European festive rituals with my obligations as a teacher of sports sciences. She had shown me an ethnographic example that was at the exact crossroads of my two areas of expertise, thereby encouraging me to open up my potential.

Of course, all of this was no coincidence. I learned later that in Delphi in 1992, Emily had taken part in an important conference on European ethnology, in which my thesis supervisor, Professor Jocelyne Bonnet-Carbonell, now eighty years old, was also present, and where the future directions of our field of research had been discussed. The issue of temporality had been central in this symposium, something that was based on research into myths and rituals. The construction of political Europe at the start of the 1990s, as well as the discovery of the folklore of Eastern countries by Western ethnologists, justified the development of comparative research as a means of strengthening scientific cooperation at a European scale. This was indeed a question, in a somewhat utopian way, of supporting the construction of a new European identity and of placing emphasis on the unity of Europe's mythical and symbolic roots. Ethnologists, historians, folklorists, and specialists in comparative mythology would thus be called upon to justify scientifically a political enterprise that was geared towards progress. These scholars, the oldest of whom had experienced World War II and had suffered for decades during the Cold War, all knew the

importance of scientific humanism in strengthening human ties and advancing society.

Today, thirty years after founding conference and twenty years after my first meeting with Emily, the situation in Europe could not be more uncertain. In the West, populism has reactivated divisions between nations and critical discourse has led to the United Kingdom leaving political Europe. In the East, the fratricidal war that is bloodying Ukraine shows that peace is always a fragile and ephemeral thing. Of course, these circumstances are sad, but they should not discourage us. On the contrary, they demonstrate the need to act and reflect together, relentlessly, considering that the mind is stronger than anything else and that the human sciences are of key importance with regard to strengthening solidarity between peoples. Through her various texts, Emily has shown us that it is possible to understand what creates the unity of the human spirit. Her often elaborate analysis has shown us the complex links that, in all cultures, articulate the biography of individuals, the stages of the life cycle, the collective rules of the society, the principles of territorial belonging, and the order of the seasons and the cosmos. Emily is one of the few researchers who manages to hold all of these aspects together, viewing them from a holistic perspective that constantly reminds us of the heuristics of comparison and listening.

In addition to her human qualities, her availability, and her kindness, Emily has surprising capacities for synthesis. She is able to connect very simple things, such as the children's accounts of the Galoshins, with very deep mythological structures and universal aspects of human culture, such as the need to order the world or to recreate it in a game. I really have no idea where or how Emily learned to work like this, but I must say that this mystery adds to her charm, just like the fact that she regularly mobilizes French authors such as Georges Dumézil or Gilbert Durand that hardly anyone in French academia uses today, in spite of their great relevance for human sciences.

Over the course of all these years, Emily has been as strange as she is familiar to me. We have laughed a lot, sometimes while eating a Pizza at Vittoria opposite the National Library of Scotland and talking about everything and nothing over a glass of wine. A few hours later, at the School of Scottish Studies, I would find her pointing out a number of hermetic works that suddenly took me from the profane to the sacred. Emily, your explanations are always

brilliant, and we really hope to take advantage of you for a few more years! Take good care of yourself!

## Neill Martin, Edinburgh, Scotland

In 1990, I returned to Scotland after some years of studying in Canada and teaching in France. As well as teaching I had spent the year preparing to begin a DPhil in Jacobean Drama at an English university. To secure the funding offered, I had to do some writing, and I spent my days that summer in the National Library of Scotland. I hadn't been home in years and quickly realised how much I had missed the city. Even the cry of the man selling the evening newspaper was enough to trigger a strong feeling of nostalgia. Still, on I worked, since a good opportunity lay ahead of me. One afternoon, tired of the stuffy reading room, I went for a walk around the University. I found myself in George Square, reading the sign outside for the School of Scottish Studies. A lady approached with keys and asked if she could help me. This was Emily. 'Oh', I said, 'I'm just wondering what goes on here'. Emily invited me inside and explained the work of the School; fieldwork, archives, the many and varied interests of the staff. She showed me the room I was likely to share, with a fine view over the gardens. I had studied mainly literature, so when Emily talked about ballads I was particularly interested. I thought how marvellous it would be to travel around interviewing people, recording them and writing about traditional cultural forms. Within an hour or so, Emily had convinced me to apply for a PhD at the School. The work of the School seemed so different from academic departments I was familiar with; so engaged with the lives of ordinary folk, so important to the cultural life of the nation. Thus evangelised, I applied for funding and was fortunate enough to receive it. I began that September, studying ballads with Emily and the late Alan Bruford. Emily was the ideal supervisor; encouraging and kindly, but also a robust critic who let me know when my work wasn't up to scratch, which alas was quite often. She was a thorough editor; if Emily thought something could be excised or didn't fit, it was gone – she was always right, of course.

In 1997, I began working at the University of St Andrews. It was largely a management position, although with some teaching too. One ordinary day in 2001, at my desk in my suit and tie, I was surprised to find an email from Emily in my inbox. A lectureship had become available at the School, and

Emily thought I should apply. Which I did. I am now beginning my twenty-first year with the department. It is thus no exaggeration to say that I have Emily to thank for my entire academic career. Had I not bumped into her quite by chance that day, none of this would have happened. Had she not kept me in her thoughts and alerted me to the job at Edinburgh, I would still be up there, in my suit and tie. Over the years, Emily and I have supervised many postgraduate students together. She gives each the same unfailing support and wise counsel I was fortunate to receive. Her dedication to the field is legendary; at a stage in life when many would have settled for a steady slide into dotage, for many years Emily was still attending conferences far and wide, delivering startling, insightful and challenging papers to her peers, still climbing the stairs every day to her eyrie in George Square. I can best illustrate this by a final anecdote. When Emily reached the age of 65, the department organised a retiral party – a trip on a canal barge. We travelled there by bus. I sat a few seats behind. Emily was holding a balloon with 'I'm retired' on it. That was a Friday. She was back at her desk on Monday morning.