

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### 26TH ISCLR CONFERENCE IN DUBLIN

On 7–10 July 2008, the 26th annual conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research was held in Dublin. The conference participants were presented 32 papers and two films: *Shutter* (2004) introduced by Mikel Koven, and *Return to Glennascaul: A Story that is Told in Ireland* (1951), introduced by Sandy Hobbs and Paul Smith. The ISCLR has established an Annual Book Prize in honor of Brian McConnell. The winner of the 2008 prize was *Haunting Experiences. Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* by three well-known folklorists: Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider and Jeannie Banks Thomas. The book discusses ghost lore while examining it from multiple angles in modern contexts. Stephanie Singleton was awarded the Annual Student Prize to honour the memory of Dr. David Buchan (1939–1994) for the research on the conspiracy theory.

For the following overview I have singled out some presentations from the entirely interesting and enriching conference. The presentations analyzed the different angles and subtopics of contemporary legend (see abstracts at <http://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale/ftn70.htm>). The main themes discussed at the conference were politics, media



*From the left: Eda Kalmre, Mare Kalda and Mare Kõiva from the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, in Ireland. Photo from the author's personal collection, 2008.*

power and influence of media channels on the oral traditions, the origin of different stories, symbolized characters, anti-legends and parodies, theory of contemporary legend research, etc.

David Main examined and updated Sandy Hobbs's (1987) ideas of classifying contemporary legends from a psychological perspective. Bill Ellis looked at the legendary significance of politics. The crusade against illegal immigrants has become one of the dominant themes in the 2008 political campaigns, which drew much of their momentum from legends and legend types documented both in previous times and also in other cultures where immigration has become a volatile political issue. Carl Lindahl analyzed levee legends after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, comparing rationality/non-rationality styles, and the political use of legends.

Using Pamela Donovan's work on online crime legends, Peter Burger integrated criminology, studies in journalism and legend studies to analyze the rhetoric of crime legend debates in different media. He took a closer look into stories about drink spiking, snuff movies, organ theft, and the Smiley Gang. Mark Glazer reviewed the manner in which prescriptions and proscriptions are a part of contemporary legends, as well as the effects these miniature horror stories have on our perception of taboos and proper cultural behavior in modern culture.

David Clarke analysed the 19th-century ghost panic connected with Spring-heeled Jack – a robber who was believed to have springs in the heels of his boots. The first panic surged in the London in the 1830s; in the late 19th century, a legend of a similar ghost spread across England and Scotland. Clarke's source material was the 19th-century British Library newspaper digitizations which enabled to follow Spring-heeled Jack's visit to Sheffield between Easter and Whitsuntide in 1873. Petr Janecek analyzed the rumours about a mysterious phantom called Perak (Springer) or Perovy muz (Spring Man), which were spread in Czechoslovakia in the 1940s under the Nazi occupation. The rumours are close to Czech wartime urban phantoms like Ziletkar (Razor Blade Man), Fosforak (Phosphoric Man). As a source of inspiration, the researcher introduced the British urban phantom Spring-heeled Jack from the 19th century, the local East-Bohemian demonic beings, or the influence of anti-Catholic legends from the end of the 19th century.

Eda Kalmre centred in her paper on a popular post-Second World War rumour, which circulated in Tartu, about an alleged human sausage mill in the ruins near the Tartu market.

Diane E. Goldstein explored the creation of three folk heroes or anti-heroes – “Looter man”, “Green helmet guy” and “Flat Fatima” on the Internet. They became powerful anti-legends, critiquing the legendary characteristics of their initial subject through parody. These characters were depicted in news photography, and subsequently became the subject of parody in popular culture contexts. Applying the theory of Vladimir Propp, Mare Kalda analyzed the narrative content of media messages discussing incidents of searching for hidden treasures, published in the Estonian written press.

Sandy Hobbs and Seonaid Anderson analyzed the accounts of people being gassed and robbed on trains, in caravans, trucks, villas and hotels. The vivid stories tend to be first-person narratives but bear resemblance to urban legends.

Elissa R. Henken introduced a genre of proverb legend, *chwedl dihareb* – a genre of legends which provide explanation (or an origin) for proverbs.

Mikel J. Koven continued with filmic folklore, searching for the roots of horror film based on temporary Thai ghostlore, and the film as a model for cinematic storytelling.

It is clear that rumours and legends are closely connected to the political and social situation of a country, vanishing after the end of the conflict, but returning some years later. Nevertheless, some legends and rumors or legend characters are and remain deeply rooted in the memories and oral traditions of the people, as well as in the popular culture.

Mare Kõiva

## **MEDICA 2008: NARRATIVES ABOUT ILLNESSES AND THEIR TREATMENT**

Medica 2008, the fifth international seminar on ethnomedicine was held on 21 October 2008 at the Estonian Agricultural Museum in Ülenurme near Tartu, Estonia. The large number of participants present at the seminar was a proof that narratives about illnesses and their treatment truly interest people. The contemporary society has been successful in mediating to the general public a myth of health being a normal physical condition and illnesses as a threat to it. Thus, health care, healthy lifestyle choices and battling with diseases represent one of the most important themes of human interaction. We hear stories about illnesses and methods of treatment while listening to the radio at breakfast, we read about these in newspapers and magazines and come across them on television and at online websites. Narratives about illnesses and open discussions regarding their treatment form an inseparable part of everyday life.

The seminar was organized by folklorists and therefore there was very little discussion about specific diseases. The main focus of the seminar was on the representations of illnesses and their meaning in different contexts.

Mare Kõiva (Estonian Literary Museum) held the opening speech in which she introduced the online community of people suffering from diabetics at a medical portal [www.kliinik.ee](http://www.kliinik.ee). Eve Annuk from Estonian Culture Historical Archives discussed the different interpretations of the letters, and references to illness in these letters, by Ilmi Kolla, an Estonian poetess who died of tuberculosis at a young age. Piret Paal's (University of Helsinki) paper tackled the sociocultural significance of the concept of cancer in the illness narratives of Finnish cancer patients. Particularly the latter two papers allowed to conclude that for an individual the condition which is perceived as abnormal and which causes suffering is far more important than a specific disease with its official diagnosis and treatments. The suffering caused by illness is not only physical and it also has an effect on people's mental and spiritual condition and the general quality of life. Finding a way to express one's emotions regarding the situation is therefore highly important.