

Review

Reviewed Work(s): SHOWFOLK: AN ORAL HISTORY OF A FAIRGROUND DYNASTY by Frank Bruce

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Elaine Bauer did for a book looking at transnational Jamaican families (E Bauer and P Thompson, *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, 2006). Even in Alistair Thomson's one-to-one interviews, the relational aspects are to the fore – especially in the giving of the interview to him as the researcher. This may well be linked with an often unspoken sense of wanting to connect with different generations, a point highlighted by Pam Schweitzer who, in her mid sixties and 'having now reached the age of some of my younger interviewees' (p 74), was then interviewed herself by the Oral History Society. Paul Thompson also reflects on the relationship between interviewer and participant, questioning how far and in what ways we might influence interviews and cautioning us to be alert to the entire process from setting up the interviews, to conducting them and then analysing and interpreting them. Getting beyond and behind the surface accounts is vital for all the contributors to this volume, be they the 'lyrical' descriptions of the countryside and landscape given by Paul Thompson's Jamaican migrants; the 'romantic adventure story' told by one of Alistair Thomson's interviewees; or the 'nostalgic' memories of Graham Smith's older Dundonians as they spoke about places within the town and about belonging and identity.

Unfortunately, space does not permit me to explore in great detail the very many other themes and resonances contained in this collection but age itself, along with gender, are also important factors in remembering. Alistair Thomson examines age in some depth, whilst gender is touched upon by Paul Thompson and by Graham Smith. Similarly, the ways in which we remember parts of our lives because of significant occasions, signposts or hooks into what has gone before, are also evident throughout, as are the connections we tend to make between private experiences and public events. The chapters in this slim volume are rich with ideas about the different approaches to oral history evident over the years. Together, my expectation that they might inform my own work has been more than met – I hope they do the same for other readers.

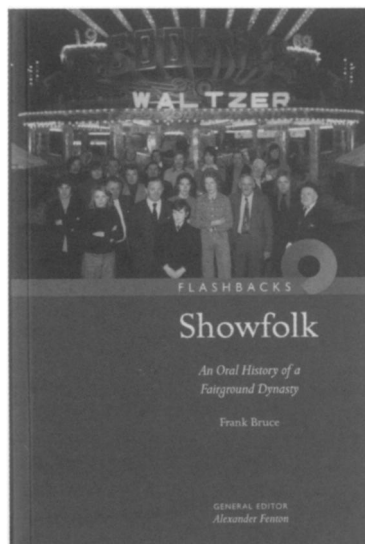
■ **Miriam Bernard**

SHOWFOLK: AN ORAL HISTORY OF A FAIRGROUND DYNASTY

Frank Bruce

Edinburgh: The European Ethnological Research Centre/National Museums Scotland, 2010, 288pp, £10.99, paperback.

The number of publications on Scottish showpeople are, to say the least, sparse. Leaving aside those books that devote the odd paragraph or chapter to the situation north of the border, we have Johnny Swallow's anecdotal *Round-About-Scotland*, Carol MacNeill's fine popular history of *Kirkcaldy Links Market*, Ian McGraw's article 'The Fairs of Dundee', numerous citations in Eliz-



abeth Jordan's doctoral work on Traveller's Education, J Morris' research into eighteenth century Scottish fairs, and the colourful biographical accounts of David Prince Miller and J Leatham. Taken together the sum of the available literature would cover about a quarter of an average bookshelf. Vanessa Toulmin of Sheffield University, who has singlehandedly increased scholarship on UK fairgrounds by an incalculable percentage, is now required reading for new researchers and has always done her best to include Scottish fairground families in her work.

Beyond this, Scotland, whose popular culture is acknowledged as a distinctive and particular case within the UK (confirmed by the recent AHRC-funded *Scottish Pantomime Project* at the University of Glasgow)

has failed to produce much scholarship on its fairground tradition. But overall, the general body of knowledge is segmented, indirect and piecemeal, and as far as Scotland's showpeople are concerned, thin compared to its other travelling communities.

Showfolk, Frank Bruce's excellent oral history of the Codona family, takes us another small, but important step, towards redress. Bruce has consumed and cited all of the publications noted above, augmented by a very thorough trawl of the footnotes, asides and references gleaned from more general texts, archives and contemporary journalism. Duncan Dallas' *The Travelling People*, the only comprehensive popular social history ever attempted is absent, which is probably more of a comment on the utility of this somewhat flawed book than the scope of Bruce's reading.

The centrepiece of his work is however, the extensive interviews with the 'royalty' of Scottish fairgrounds. Bruce uses their particular experience to reflect on the development of popular entertainment over the past century, as well as what it means to belong to this community. The author of *The Music Hall, Variety and Pantomime Programme* is well placed to provide a wider context to the oral accounts of Codona family members, and his Introduction and opening chapters 'The Fair Familiar Faces' and 'Geggies, Gallopers and the Ghost Show' provide a thoughtful, concise historical account of the development of the modern fairground.

The chapters that follow ('The Fun City', 'Four Brothers and Thirteen Cousins', 'The Rides, the People and the Winter Ground', 'Family and the Fairground Community' and 'Traveling and Settling') consist mostly of extensive transcripts selected from interviews with family members that relate to the themes. Bruce is a relaxed and perceptive interviewer who clearly built up a strong rapport with his subjects and allows their voices, and the rhythms of their speech to come through. This is important, as the oral culture of fairground life; the 'sayso', speling, the gee and 'telling the tale' are of huge structural importance to the culture and its enduring sense of identity are often overlooked.

Yet as an oral history the usual caveats must apply when using it to

piece together a wider historical understanding; it is by its nature, narrow in its perspective. Because the Codonas chose to establish their ascendancy in places such as Edinburgh and Aberdeen, the unique 'critical mass' of the Glasgow 'grounds' or winter yards (an estimated 2,500 showpeople live in over fifty yards in areas such as Shettleston and Dalmarnock) so crucial to understanding how the community thrives and survives is touched upon, but largely uncovered here. In one section a member of the Codona attributes the clannishness of his family to their Italian ancestry, yet if there is an easily identified ethnological feature of showground families, clannishness would be it – a Pinder, White or Manders might take issue over claims they were any less close knit (and go further, into wondering if the Codonas are considered to be the only family ever thought to have travelled Scotland). Yet, the Codonas interviewed here come across well, and offer warm and revealing portraits of other families on the circuit. It is in any case hard to see how in any history of Scottish showpeople the Codonas could ever be ignored but with Bruce's book we can now consider them well covered until a comprehensive and wide-ranging history of the Scottish community as a whole, incorporating multiple

perspectives, is published.

Bruce's work highlights the need for further work, and here are just a few suggestions. At their height, the Codonas were the premiere 'lessees' in Scotland. The view of such 'riding masters' is generally privileged in the literature, and it can be forgotten that initiatives such as founding the Showman's Guild was deeply contentious, specifically, the initial attempt to exclude smaller 'firms' from joining. These families temporarily refused to engage in the cooperative capitalism that is crucial to a fair even existing and set up the rival 'stallholders association'. The history of these events survive only in the oral record and now would be a good time to find out what the descendants of these families remember.

But these are not faults in Bruce's book itself but of the general field – many of the tasks mentioned above go beyond oral history into other disciplines. Earlier in this review I called *Showfolk* a landmark study and do not use the term lightly; I can see my own copy becoming well thumbed and much quoted. The hope now is that the privileged view into one's family historical trajectory entices further research to create a broader perspective that spreads much further along the bookshelf.

■ **Mitch Miller**

NOTES ON REVIEWERS

MIRIAM BERNARD is President of the British Society of Gerontology (2010–2012) and a Professor and Director of Keele University's Centre for Social Gerontology. She began her career in the voluntary sector working for the Beth Johnson Foundation and has twenty-five years experience of policy and practice-relevant research with older people.

JOANNA BORNAT is emeritus professor of oral history at the Open University. She is an editor of *Oral History* and has a long-standing interest in remembering in late life. More recently she has been researching and writing about oral history and skilled migration and the re-use of archived oral history interviews.

ANDREW DAVIES teaches modern British social history at the University of Liverpool. He is currently writing a book on the Glasgow gangs of the 1920s and 1930s with the working title *The Scottish Chicago*.

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MITCH MILLER is a writer, artist and researcher currently researching the history of travelling showpeople in Glasgow. He teaches at the University of Glasgow and Edinburgh College of Art and is himself from a circus and showground family.

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LOUISE RYAN is co-Director of the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University and a Reader in Gender and Migration. She has published widely on Irish and Polish migrants in Britain. She has a particular interest in gender, family migration and social networks. Her most recent book (co-edited with Wendy Webster) is entitled *Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity and Ethnicity in Post-War Migration to Britain* (Ashgate, 2008).

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ANDREW WHEATCROFT worked for more than twenty years in publishing, first in women's magazines, then in general, academic and professional book publishing. After a fifteen-year diversion into university life, where he was a Professor and Director of The Stirling Centre for International Publishing and Communication, he returned to the international publishing industry in 2009. He is now Chief Consultant, Maclean Veit Associates Ltd.