

Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich, and A Reflective Migrant's Insightful Contributions to Folkloric and Like Studies, Especially in Australasia

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In recent years, users of the internet will have seen various references to Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich and her publications, and the folklorists among them may well recall that she and her husband, both then New Zealand-domiciled, were present at the Melbourne meeting of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research. Unfortunately its papers were not published in hard copy in India—as had been hoped. However, in the electronic journal, *Folklore*, they have long been available as articles in English, namely the full form of their Melbourne illuminating contributions.

Rolf W. Boenisch is best-known to us as the senior editor of the *Encyclopadie des Marchens: Band 12*, the paperback edition of which appeared in 2005. His Melbourne article, as is explained at its end, would be published in the electronic folklore journal, *Folklore*, where it appears as—‘Where They Originated, Some Contemporary Legends¹ and their Literary Origins’, while Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich appears in volume 21, for her paper, ‘Migration and Narration’, a most readable account of the ways of ‘telling migration’. [Indeed, it would prove to be the schema for her later book. See below.] This introductory paper of hers is a study based on a one-year fieldwork project combining participant observation from within the subject-group with interviewing.

As she explained, her work was ethnographical, but primarily biographical, gaining many insights into people's experiences, and, over and above that ‘to learn what kind of stories and techniques of storytelling emigration creates’. The time frame is one of some 60 years, from the time of the political refugees from Germany appearing in New Zealand in significant numbers in the nineteen thirties, to much more recent years. By virtue of the time range, it is possible to analyze very different periods of emigration, and so contrast social classes, patterns of

¹ Although the paper is wide-ranging, there are a number of comparative comments on Australia, e.g. as in the case of the Kangaroo as a waistcoat thief.

education, the motives for emigration, and, in the process consider the whole change from the ‘emigration’ at the beginning, to a life-style choice, as it seems to have been for the more moneyed in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps more significantly, the age of the researcher and her life experiences made her very much of an ‘insider’ for this exercise.

And as she observed at the outset—

Although all migrants were leaving Germany and arriving in New Zealand, they experienced what were in effect very different countries through time—different Germanys, different New Zealands. (p. 66)

And so it becomes obvious that this work had the potential for/ had a larger theme—and one which she would soon embrace—namely, to work out the changing reasons for migrating—work migration, refuge, global lifestyle—not merely in going to New Zealand, but for such movement from/ inside western societies in the same period.

And thus—very much as might have been predicted—this project would lead to a book, exploring the issues further, namely her *Keeping a Low Profile* (published by Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand in paperback, in 2003), it then being described as ‘oral history of German Immigration to New Zealand, based on extensive field research, including 102 life history interviews and an in-depth study of archival sources and secondary literature’.

And in due course, she would contribute to the milestone volume,² a joint paper, *Historical Justice in International Perspective: How Societies Are Trying to Right the Wrongs of the Past*, which was based on her contribution to the International Conference sponsored by the German Historical Institute (GHI) and the Wilson Center in March of 2003. Then Bain Atwood (of Monash University) would consider the multivalent ways in which histories have influenced projects of reconciliation in settler societies, whereas Richard Hill and Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich had jointly demonstrated how—in New Zealand—negotiation of compensation to the Maori for the Crown’s past breaches of New Zealand’s founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), had reached an advanced level of understanding of the issues and the necessary equities inherent in it. However, they had also asserted that the majority of the white European population (the *pakehas*) had not fully

² This would become a volume in the series, the Publications of the German Historical Institute, be co-edited by Manfred Berg, and be issued by the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Germany and—in English speaking countries—through the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC.

realized that the provision of reparation for past wrongs would not suffice.

They had also stressed how the long-running Maori quest for autonomy (*Rangatoratanga*) was a central issue, and how the country had more recently—and officially—become bi-cultural, in contrast to the inevitable assimilation habits/ practices of the past. The powerful achievement of the book is thus a fresh focus on redress for historical injustices by offering case studies from nine countries, and on five continents. Ignoring the cases from the USA, from South Africa and Cambodia, for the moment, it is clear that the book should both help Australians to understand their historical responsibilities, as well as learn from the differing ways in which New Zealand has tried—and is still trying—to provide redress for past wrongs.

The significance of these German scholars for Australian/Australasian folklore is that they have come with a lifetime of experience in our discipline, and focused on issues of high significance and done so with fresh eyes.

It is clear that the minimal range of ethnic folklores explored in, say, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, not remotely adequate, any more than the New Zealanders—or the Australians—should consider that the most insightful responses to their diverse culture will always come from within their ranks.

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NOTE: in reference to Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich.

Together with Richard Hill, she has recently contributed to the volume, *Historical Justice in International Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009), as edited by Manfred Berg and Bernd Schaefer, the tenth chapter, 'Fitting Aotearoa into New Zealand: Politic-cultural change in a modern bicultural nation'.