

ABORIGINAL BRITAIN: ETHNOLOGICAL FOLKLORISTICS AND THE ORIGIN
OF THE NATION IN THE WORK OF SIR GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME, SIR
JOHN RHŶS AND ALFRED NUTT

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ABSTRACT

Through a close reading of the theoretical work of folklorists Sir George Laurence Gomme, Sir John Rhÿs, and Alfred Nutt and extensive research into the discourses of human and social origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this thesis examines the use of folklore as a tool for the scientific interpretation of the history and identity of the nation. This thesis concentrates in particular on the emergence of indigeneity as a central concern for folklorists working with the archive of traditional lore and custom; through an extensive examination of Gomme, Rhÿs, and Nutt's intellectual relationship, I trace the ways in which each identified and delineated a particular source for the national self. Finally, this thesis argues that the discourse of folklore was a key player in the formation of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century conceptions of national and racial history and demonstrates the extent to which an ethnological discourse, often considered solely in a colonial context, was central to the period's interpretations of Britain's national genealogy and historical identity.

Part One demonstrates the pivotal role Sir George Laurence Gomme played in the development of folklore as a science and argues for the centrality of the discipline of folklore itself in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century ethnological discourse. Gomme's theory of an indigenous, pre-Aryan racial inheritance in the development of British institutional history is also analyzed in detail, and the intellectual and popular genealogy of the idea of the pre-Aryan is given extensive examination. Part Two considers the work of Sir John Rhÿs and Alfred Nutt on Celtic language and folklore in the context of Gomme's paradigm. Rhÿs' use of folklore as a tool for philological research into the history of Britain is contextualized within intellectual developments in German and British linguistic research, and it is shown that the concept of a pre-Aryan indigenous race was central to his interpretation of European linguistic and racial history. Alfred Nutt's research into the history and development of Celtic narrative and legend is contextualized to demonstrate his inheritance of continental scholarly discourses on Celtic folklore, and the significance of Nutt's argument for a Celtic, rather than a non-Aryan indigeneity, is discussed in relation to both Gomme and Rhÿs' interpretation of British prehistory. Finally, it is shown that Nutt imagined folklore to be an inherently imperialist project, and folklorists as the stewards of Britain's subject nations' racial-cultural archives; his views are examined in the context of early twentieth-century Irish nationalism and the Celtic Revival.

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