From Coins to Locks: A spectrum of contemporary deposits

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Introduction

Ritual deposition is as much a feature of the present as it was of the past. In fact, it could be argued that it is a more widespread feature now, with what folklorist Jack Santino (2004) has termed 'folk assemblages' emerging prolifically worldwide. From roadside memorials and mountaintop cairns, to wishing fountains and shoe trees, our landscapes are bestrewn with collective deposits. Lynne McNeill, also a folklorist, refers to such collections as 'serial collaborative creations', which she argues are symptomatic of the state of current society. We react against our increasingly intangible (i.e. digital) relationships and incohesive communities by contributing something physical to a shared piece or place (2007: 282). As Cathy Preston, contemporary legends scholar, observes, people:

> cumulatively form an object that itself evokes the sense of an imagined community—that imagined community being the various individuals, usually anonymous, who have responded in kind to the acts of earlier individuals and who frequently envision their responses as linking them to a group of people who, though invisible to them, are made visible by that which they have left behind (2007: 12).

I have argued previously that contemporary folk assemblages, despite (or perhaps because of) their popularity, are often casual and ad hoc (— 2015 : 123 ; 2018b : 99). At least in the British Isles (the geographic focus of some of this paper), this is evident in the deposits themselves, generally low in economic value. It is pennies rather than pounds that people throw into fountains ; old trainers rather than Jimmy Choos that they hang on tree branches. This may reflect the (low ?) level of belief bestowed on such rituals of exchange today. Perhaps they are observed more for the sense of collaboration and 'imagined community' they provide than for any credulity in the efficacy of the ritual.

I have also argued previously that convenience is another significant factor in determining which objects are deposited (— 2018a : 53-55 ; 109-110).This is evident in historian Tristan Hulse's examination of St. Trillo's Chapel, Llandrillo-yn-Rhos, Wales, said to be the smallest chapel in the British Isles and to occupy a site consecrated by St. Trillo in the sixth century. Visiting the site in the 1990s, Hulse observed a large assemblage of contemporary deposits, primarily handwritten prayers, and found that the majority were written on scraps of paper sourced from pockets and handbags : envelopes, receipts, pages torn from diaries, and transport tickets (1995 : 33). This indicates spontaneity. People are depositing objects ready at hand (e.g. coins in fountains) or sourced on site (e.g. rocks on cairns), because they have not come to this assemblage with the purpose of making a contribution. In fact, in many cases they do not appear to have visited the assemblage by design at all, but rather they stumble upon it by chance and are compelled to contribute (— 2016). Returning to Santino, such assemblages 'invite participation' (2004 : 368).

However, not all contemporary deposits are spontaneously made. Some are clearly planned ; purchased or produced before a visit to an assemblage with the express purpose of being deposited. This implies greater emotional investment (if not belief) in the ritual, and indicates that not all modern-day folk assemblages are casual and ad hoc. To engage with this seeming dichotomy between the spontaneous and planned deposits, this paper will examine two forms of contemporary assemblage : the coin-tree and the love-lock bridge. As well as their modernity, the two forms are linked by their non-institutionalization, their (often) lack of religiosity, and their connection to tourism, with tourists being the primary depositors of both.

Introducing the Coin-Tree

As this paper is not intended as a study of the coin-tree itself, but rather employs the coin-tree as an exemplar in a theoretical consideration of the coin as casual deposit, only a necessarily brief summary of the practice will be supplied (see — 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b for more detailed considerations).

Coin-trees are exactly what the name would suggest : trees (most often logs) which have coins embedded edgeways into their bark (Fig. 1). Thus far, 40 sites containing over 200 coin-trees have been catalogued, distributed widely across England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These sites are often in rural areas accessible to the public, situated alongside popular woodland or riverside footpaths. Of the 40 sites, 37 are 'active', insofar as people today continue to participate in the custom of inserting coins into the trees. During fieldwork conducted in 2011–13, all coins deposited into/on coin-trees at 31 of the sites were catalogued, reaching a total of 165,360.

The earliest known coin-tree is an uprooted oak on Isle Maree, a small island in Loch Maree in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland (Fig. 2). The first reference to deposits at this site comes from Thomas Pennant's 1775 *A tour in Scotland and voyage to the Hebrides*, in which he describes the island's holy well, said to have been consecrated by Saint Maelrubha — also known as Saint Maree — in the eighth century and widely believed to cure insanity. Beside the holy well was a tree, which was utilised as an 'altar' ; pilgrims who sought a cure from the well would leave their tokens of thanks to Saint Maelrubha on this particular tree (Pennant 1775 : 330).

Initially, these tokens appear to have been rags (strips of cloth also known as clooties), which were common votive offerings.[1] However, during the nineteenth century, pilgrims began leaving other objects such as nails and pins (Campbell 1860 : 134 ; Mitchell 1863 : 253). These metallic objects had originally been employed to hold the rags in place on the tree, but had

[1] Rags and items of clothing have long been employed as votive deposits in the British Isles, most often affixed to the branches of trees and bushes within close proximity to a holy well. For surveys of such sites, and theories concerning the use of rags for contagious transfer, see Hardy (1840), Walhouse (1880), Hartland (1893), Hope (1893), Jones (1954), Lucas (1963), Bord & Bord (1985), Shephard (1994), Rattue (1995), Healy (2001) and Rackard et al. (2001).

gradually become offerings in and of themselves (Dixon 1886 : 152), and by the late nineteenth century they appear to have been replaced by coins.

In 1877 the site received a famous visitor : Queen Victoria, who travelled to Isle Maree on a tour of Scotland. She and her party embedded some coins into the tree themselves, although by this point the coin was simply viewed as an offering to St Maelrubha rather than as a bid for the cure of insanity. Queen Victoria described the tree in her diary, in an entry dated 17 September 1877, as follows :

> The boat was pushed onshore, and we scrambled out and walked through the tangled underwood and thicket of oak, holly, beech, etc., which covers the islet, to the well, now nearly dry which is said to be celebrated for the cure of insanity. An old tree stands close to it, and into the bark of this it is the custom, from time immemorial, for everyone who goes there to insert with a hammer a copper coin, as a sort of offering to the saint who lived there in the eighth century…We hammered some pennies into the tree (cited in Duff 1968 : 332–3)

There are a number of other coin-tree sites in Scotland and Ireland which boast similarly lengthy biographies : Ardmaddy, Argyll (Fig. 3) (Rodger et al. 2003 : 87) ; Clonenagh, Co. Laois (Roe 1939 : 27 ; Morton 2004 : 195 ; Harbison 1991 : 231 ; Simon 2000 : 28) ; and Ardboe, Co. Tyrone (Grimes 1999). Coin-trees have been in existence at these sites since the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. However, the majority of the 40 coin-tree sites catalogued thus far are recent in origin. These are often on public sites managed by environment and conservation organisations, such as the National Trust and the Forestry Commission, but these organisations do not take credit for the resurgence of the custom. Coins apparently began appearing in trees quite spontaneously during the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s (for possible reasons considered in Houlbrook 2018). While the physical custom of embedding coins into trees may be the same at these modern-day sites as they were in the earlier examples in Scotland and Ireland, the 'meaning' of the custom has changed.

For example, healing was the original purpose of coin-trees at Isle Maree, Clonenegh and Ardboe. However, of the 200 contemporary depositors I have spoken with about this practice during the years 2011–13, none of them alluded to healing as a possible function of the coin-tree. This is hardly surprising considering that illness and premature death were a much greater concern in the past than they are today, and those who are concerned for their health are more likely to visit a doctor than participate in a ritual of exchange (Hamilton 1981 : 102 ; Vyse 1997 : 12). Nor did any of the depositors refer to religion, Christianity or otherwise, when discussing their participation.

Today, instead of embedding coins into trees for folk-remedial purposes, a variety of other reasons are given. Many modern-day depositors – primarily tourists who encounter the coin-trees on daytrips to popular rural destinations – admit to only participating in the custom because others had done so before them ; they are motivated by the notion of following a 'tradition'. Others cited aesthetics as the primary motivating factor. They viewed the coin-trees as pieces of communal art, and wished to contribute to them — a form of 'leaving one's mark'

that many practitioners referred to. As one woman claimed, depositing a coin is ‘leaving something of yourself for others to see’.

However, many others – especially those with children — expressed the notion that their coins are surrendered to coin-trees in exchange for something positive in return, be it good luck, future fortune or the fulfilment of a wish. Several people termed the coin-tree a ‘wishing-tree’ or a ‘good-luck tree’, drawing on a comparison with the wishing-well, and many others referenced the concept of ‘lucky pennies’. Often, however, these notions were vague, with few depositors going into any detail about what they considered the purpose of the custom to be, and none stating a definitive reason for participating. I have argued elsewhere that this ambiguity and multivocality demonstrates the ‘mutability of meaning’ ; the custom of the coin-tree can be variously interpreted depending upon the when, where and whom of participation (— 2014).

The Coin as Casual Deposit

The coin has a long history of being used as a ritual deposit, both in pre-Christian and Christian contexts. This notion of surrendering a coin in payment for the fulfilment of a wish is not unfamiliar to us today. The wishing-well or fountain is a common feature of parks, tourist destinations and shopping centres across Europe — indeed, worldwide — ranging from the famed Trevi Fountain, Rome to the less well-known sites that we stumble across in our daily lives. Despite its popularity, however, the coin was not created as a deposit or votive object, but was instead made for secular, everyday use. It has been, to use Osborne’s words, ‘“converted” into an item that might be employed in an exchange with supernatural powers’ (2004 : 2) (a process explored in greater detail in — 2015, 2016). How, though, does this conversion occur and why is the coin deemed suitable for such an exchange ?

The insertion of a coin into a coin-tree is rarely a planned ritual. Modern-day practitioners do not visit coin-tree sites by design, but rather stumble across them by chance, often choosing to participate in an ad hoc practice by imitating those who had come before (— 2016 : 250–253). Only 17 per cent of people interviewed had come across coin-trees before that day. The rest were unaware of the custom and so had not come equipped with pre-selected deposits. In Walhouse’s nineteenth-century study of rag-trees, he observed that participants do not always come to the rag-tree prepared. By necessity, they often source their deposit from ‘any trivial objects ready at hand – horns, bones, tufts of hair, shreds, and the like’ (1880 : 104). However, Walhouse was writing in the late nineteenth century about global, historic customs ranging from China to the ‘New World’. Horns, bones and tufts of hair may have been ‘trivial objects ready at hand’ in those contexts, but probably not in modern-day Britain. So what object is both trivial (i.e. disposable) and readily accessible to somebody in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century ? The coin.

Although times are changing today with the rise of electronic payments, most people usually have some coins in their possession, either carried in a purse or a pocket. Therefore, if they

wish to participate in a casual ritual which necessitates the 'sacrificing' of some object, a coin is the most convenient item for that purpose. They are also not particularly valuable. Of the 165,360 coins catalogued at all coin-tree sites, there were no £5 coins (the highest value sterling coin), only one was a £2 coin, and only 25 were £1. A vast 92 per cent were one penny and two pence coins (the lowest value), which are now economically worth very little. They are now largely viewed as disposable (Wolman 2012 : 3–4), and many modern-day participants admitted to this being the main reason they had selected from for deposition. So, through their ubiquity and disposability, coins constitute the ideal casual deposit.

However, some of the coins inserted into coin-trees show evidence of pre-planning. Some, for instance, have been physically altered, such as a two pence piece at Dovedale, Derbyshire, which has the letter 'R' written on it in silver pen (presumably the depositor's name began with 'R'). Likewise at Ingleton, Yorkshire, the initials 'R & L' have been imprinted onto a two pence piece, and at Fairy Glen, the Black Isle, Scotland, one coin has been painted red, clearly to distinguish it from the surrounding coins (Fig. 4). Back at Ingleton, seven coins have been nailed to the tree (including the 'R & L' coin) probably to increase the security of the deposits (Fig. 5). This certainly indicates that the depositors came prepared with nails, if not also hammers, neither of which are objects people tend to casually carry in their pockets. Perhaps, therefore, not all coins represent casual and spontaneous deposition.

Introducing Love-Locks

Another form of serial collaboration that has proliferated in the 21st century is the love-lock. Customarily, couples write their names or initials onto padlocks and then attach them to public structures, most often bridges, such as the Ponte Milvio, Rome, or the Brooklyn Bridge. They then throw the keys into the river below to symbolise their commitment to each other; a vow to remain together, making the love-lock an unambiguous ex-voto. In Moscow, metal tree-like structures have been erected specifically for this purpose on Luzhkov Bridge (Fig. 6), whilst on the Pont des Arts in Paris, the accumulation of love-locks reached such quantities that one of the bridge's railings collapsed under their weight in June 2014.

The origins of this practice are unclear but residents of Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, claim their assemblage on the Most Ljubavi ('Bridge of Love') dates back to the First World War. However, it gained popularity following Italy's adoption of the custom in the 2000s, triggered by Federico Moccia's 2006 romantic novel *Ho voglia di te* (*I Want You*), in which a character attaches a padlock to the Ponte Milvio. The subsequent dissemination of this practice was rapid and geographically unbound, with love-lock accumulations emerging in locations as distant and varied as New York and Seoul, Paris and Taiwan, Melbourne and Moscow.

Considering the range of their dissemination, it is unsurprising that love-locks have featured in academic research from a variety of perspectives. Art historian Cynthia Hammond (2010) focused on the assemblage in Pécs, Hungary, which dates to the 1980s ; she illustrated how it can be viewed as representative of control and dissent in the city. Urban scenographer

Jekaterina Lavrinec (2013) categorised the custom as an 'urban ritual', considering the bodily experiences of love-lock deposition. Engineer Christian Walloth (2014), describing love-locks as 'emergent [i.e. unplanned and unpredictable] qualities', explored the influence they have on urban development. Artist Lachlan MacDowell considered love-locks within the context of street art, exploring deposition through the theory of stigmergy, whereby 'urban practices cluster spatially, without direct coordination' (2015 : 41). While social scientist Kai-Olaf Maiwald (2016) adopts an objective–hermeneutic approach in his investigation into the symbolic meaning of 'padlocking' at the Hohenzollern Bridge, Cologne.

The author has contributed a material culture approach to the corpus. She has gathered data from over 100 love-lock assemblages worldwide, and catalogued over 700 love-locks removed from Leeds Centenary Bridge, UK, in 2016. In addition, through conducting a site-specific investigation into the growth of a love-lock assemblage on a bridge in Manchester, UK (Fig. 7), from February 2014 to the present, — demonstrates the value in studying an assemblage during the process of its formation rather than at one static point in time (— 2018c). This data will be drawn on in the remainder of this paper, in the consideration of the love-lock as a planned deposit.

The Love-Lock as Planned Deposit

It was asserted above that 'most people usually have some coins in their possession, either carried in a purse or a pocket. Therefore, if they wish to participate in a casual ritual which necessitates the 'sacrificing' of some object, a coin is the most convenient item for that purpose.' The same cannot be said of the padlock. While it is true that many people probably pass a love-lock assemblage by chance, the decision to participate in the custom cannot be spontaneous. Unlike coins, people rarely just happen to have a padlock on their person ; they do not tend to walk around with them in their pockets. Padlocks do not fit Walhouse's definition of 'trivial objects ready at hand'. Granted, it is usually not difficult to find a padlock for purchase – especially in urban environments – but that would often require leaving the site of an assemblage, locating a suitable shop, and returning. This is not casual deposition because the padlock is not, generally speaking, a convenient deposit.

It was also noted above that coins are selected as deposits because they are 'not particularly valuable'. The same can be said of padlocks ; one can be purchased from popular British homeware chain Wilko for £1.95 (roughly €2.20). In their low economic worth, therefore, they could be classed as casual deposits. However, they are rarely your average padlock. Some of them, such as the beautifully ornate locks from the Leeds Centenary Bridge and Erzsébet Square, Budapest (Fig. 8), and the impractically oversized ones from the Luzhkov Bridge, Moscow, and Prague (Fig. 9), were clearly expensive. Many others have been professionally engraved with names, messages, and even images. Often these will have been commissioned from one of the many websites advertising their engraving services: *Make Love Locks*, *Beloved Padlocks*, *Lock-itz*. You can order an engraved love-hearted shaped padlock from *Love Locks UK*, for example, for £19.99, with buyers currently being advised that 'Due to demand there is

currently a 7-14 day processing time on orders'.[2] For that price and that length of time, the engraved padlock is certainly not a casual deposit.

Even of those that are basic, cheap padlocks, the clear majority of them have been personally decorated. While most have simply been written on in marker (names, initials, dates, messages, much akin to graffiti and the carving of names into trees), some have been creatively embellished. The bodies of padlocks are covered in drawings, from stick figures to bumble bees, or adorned with stickers. Some have ribbons tied around their shackles ; others are covered in patterned tape. Some have been painted with nail varnish and glitter, while others have been fitted with fabric rosettes and home-knitted jackets (Fig. 10). Clearly these are padlocks that have been dressed up prior to the depositor visiting the site ; they are planned, pre-meditated, and they indicate that some people do come upon these assemblages by design. Indeed, judging by the amount of weddings and anniversaries referred to in the love-lock inscriptions, there are specific times in a couple's relationship when it is deemed most appropriate to deposit a love-lock – unlike a coin in a coin-tree, when the most appropriate time is simply when one encounters a coin-tree.

There are, however, a few exceptions to the love-lock as planned deposit. One is on the Pont Neuf, Paris, where hawkers line the bridge bearing padlocks engraved with an image of the Eiffel Tower (no keys accompany some of them, so the locks are only really good for one thing). The assemblage of love-locks here invariably attracts tourists, whom the hawkers approach with their ware. Haggling ensues and once the tourist has made their purchase, the hawker offers them a marker pen so they can write their messages onto the lock. Likewise in Verona, the giftshop of the 'Capulet House' – where love-locks are regularly deposited – sells a variety of love-heart shaped padlocks marketed as 'Official Love Locks' ; for convenience, they are packaged with black marker pens (Fig. 11). In these cases, therefore, love-locks do possibly constitute spontaneous deposits. People can make quite a casual decision there and then to participate in the custom, as they do with coin-trees.

Conclusion

Contemporary folk assemblages are often casual and ad hoc, from mountaintop cairns to wishing-wells. This is evident in the deposits themselves, generally low in economic value and conveniently ready at hand when a person happens upon an assemblage. This indicates spontaneity and perhaps, by extension, a lack of intentionality. The coin in a coin-tree is a prime example of an ex voto that has, over time, lost an earnest sense of intentionality. However, the love-lock demonstrates that not all contemporary deposits are spontaneously made. Purchased, commissioned or creatively embellished before a visit to a love-lock assemblage, many love-locks are clearly planned. This implies greater intentionality and emotional investment (if not belief) in the ritual, something that is beyond the scope of this

[2] https://www.lovelocksuk.com/romance.html; https://www.makelovelocks.com/; http://www.belovedpadlocks.com.au/engraving-text-ideas/; http://lock-itz.com/

paper but will be the focus of a future study. The aim of this paper was instead to explore this apparent dichotomy between spontaneous and planned deposits, which the author believed would be evident by contrasting the coin in a coin-tree and the love-lock.

Generally speaking, this dichotomy is evident. Coins tend to be spontaneous deposits and love-locks tend to be planned. However, this is not a firm rule. Some coins, altered and embellished before being knocked into a coin-tree, indicate pre-meditation. Conversely, some padlocks, purchased on-site along with a marker pen, imply a spontaneous decision to participate. These examples suggest less a dichotomy between 'spontaneous' and 'planned' deposition, which I previously – and apparently erroneously – advocated (— 2018a : 109-110), and more a spectrum between the two. Thus what the contemporary deposit also evinces is a spectrum of intentionality and investment, which deserves greater attention in future studies.

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