BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Henry Glassie.

Here is a good book for a change. It starts right, noting that the traditional musical arts in Ireland are far from dead. Young country people may prefer the uptown brand of American C and W, but their elders, sick of media pap, are returning to the old tunes and songs, and youthful intellectuals are rediscovering and perpetuating the old music. Robin Morton, a performer and collector, has put out a book of Ulster songs before this. But he has followed his good intuitions, and this book is more than a collection. There is more to be learned from songs themselves than last year's vanguard folklore thought, but it is easier to learn from songs when they are embedded in their singer's thought. There is more to be explained, more to be said.

Back when ethnographers were admitting that their descriptive task was difficult, back before that difficulty was obscured by deductive schemes that advance the budgetary wishes of a normative discipline faster than they get at truth, biographies of persons-in-the-culture like Sun Chief were considered eventful publications. About that time, the ballad hunter Byron Arnold decided to arrange his collection by singer rather than etic song category. Increasingly, modern collectors, such as Edith Fowke, have adopted similar formats, suggesting the possibility of a shift from studies of song qua song to studies of song as an aspect of the persona and a projection of the psyche. It is into this tradition that Morton's fine new book fits. In a way similar to that used by Leonard Roberts in his presentation of the Couches and quite like that of Roger Abrahams in his study of Almeda Riddle, Robin Morton collected John Maguire's full repertoire, and set those songs into Maguire's reminiscences.

Come Day, Go Day, God Send Sunday is not an intense biographical study like Sandy Ives' superb studies of Larry Gorman and Lawrence Doyle. Nor does it gesture artfully toward psychology like Eric Cross' grand description of the singing Tailor. It is less personal than Irish recollections like those of Peig Sayers or Patrick Kavanagh (to cite widely different examples of an Irish literary genre). The book will remind you most of such overtly folkloristic statements as Malachi Horan Remembers, or, leaving the Emerald Isle, Sixty Years a Fenman, and Bob Copper's family collection, A Song for Every Season. Robin Morton isolates things folklorists like, songs in this case, and places them into an anecdotal matrix. Lacking an Afterword like that with which Roger Abrahams followed Granny Riddle, this book is less a study than the data for
a study. We might imagine a second monograph directed to why John Maguire sings these songs and not others, but this would carry the author into biographical and psychological considerations that are tough to face while the singer and his family are alive. (Think of the sadness that Sun Chief brought on.) It's easier to be "objective" when the singer is dead. Sam's Ives could know less about his singer-song makers than Robin Morton could know about John Maguire, but he could tell us more about them. His two books will remain the models for studies of singers, but that goal may never be reached by students of thriving artists, unless the scholar's own ethics are immature (as mine were when I wrote about Dorrance Weir) or bad.

What Robin Morton has done is to transcribe and edit John Maguire's songs, his introductions to the songs and those of his reminiscences that bring meaning to the songs. It makes for very pleasant reading. The dialect is true. Maguire sounds like A Farmenagh man and an individual. The information is good, there is data for you on how songs are learned, transmitted, and forgotten, as well as on other aspects of folklore—how gardens are worked, houses conceptualized, poteen made. Maguire's full song repertoire is given. As well as ancient ballads, it includes sentimental Irish songs, pompously worded bits of poetry that may surprise the American collector but are a solid part of the Irish tradition, and examples of the local ballads that make a ballad classifier's life a nightmare, but make the tradition rich and directly instructive about local history and culture. In all, the breadth and variety of the repertoire will seem foreign to the American student who knows the Upland South tradition, though it will seem intriguingly familiar to the student of the folk-songs of the Maritime Provinces of Canada. I spent half a year listening to music in southern County Fermanagh and John Maguire reminds me of the singers I knew. As I read, the only thing that seemed unrepresentative of the tradition as I knew it was the absence of the rebel songs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The reason for this emerged in the commentary. Robin Morton didn't edit them out; John Maguire, though a Catholic, was an adherent of the relatively conservative Molly Maguire faction, and the men I knew were relatively angry Fenians. So, in accordance with every criterion I can muster, the book is a fine collection.

At the end of the ninety-five page, corg punctuated, statement by John Maguire, there are three appendices. The first consists of the music to the thirty-six songs in the text. These tunes were transcribed and introduced by John Blacking, who has turned his remarkable ethnomusicological awareness from Africa to Ireland. The second appendix is made up of the texts and tunes of nineteen more songs. The third has good comparative notes for all the songs. The only important lack there is reference to early commercial recordings of Irish songs which, like the hillbilly and race records in America, have affected the Irish singing tradition (though less than is the case in the United States). After these three, there is a glossary of local terms, and, while I might have chosen some different ones, this is a useful addition to the volume.

I enjoyed this book. It is the best thing yet on Irish songs in English, and it will be the perfect introduction for the American who would like to gain some feeling for Ulster folk-song (so long as he remembers John Maguire's politics and reads something on Orange songs and rebel songs to fill his impression
It will, too, be a direct help to those engaged in the current revival of Irish folk music. The book tells as much of the singer as it does of the song, and the revivalists might become inspired—in a way that most American revivalists weren't—to preserve style and ethic as well as text and melody.

A List of Books Referred to in the Review:


