
Reviewed by Richard M. Dorson

Since 1930 when Franklin J. Meine edited an anthology of humor of the Old Southwest titled (or mistitled) Tall Tales of the Southwest, scholarly interest in these ante-bellum newspaper humorists has grown apace. Not that public interest ended after the Civil War, for as Willard Thorp indicates in an essay in the present work, editions of their books were reprinted until the end of the century. As a Harvard undergraduate I discovered that the type on George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood had never been destroyed, and that the publishers had kept running off a few copies every year right up to 1936—fortunately for me, for I lost the copy of the 1867 edition loaned me by my tutor, the formidable Perry Miller. At any rate the literary scholars have finally caught up with appreciative readers, conquered their disdain for such humble productions, and produced in the past three and a half decades a shelfful of critical essays and biographies of individual humorists. Now Professor Inge, who previously issued new editions of Harris's Sut yarns and other sketches, has anthologized not the original humor but the scholarship that has grown up around that humor.

Inge divides the volume into five sections: (1) a triad of general essays on frontier humor, including two historically important statements by Meine and Walter Blair; (2) writings about five of the best known humorists; (3) three "folk figures"—Mike Hooter, a Mississippi bear hunter and lay preacher, David Crockett, and the presumed author (certainly not a folk figure) of a widely read and recited burlesque sermon, "The Harp of a Thousand Strings;" (4) a quintet of essays under the rubric "Impact on American Literature," relating the humorists, particularly Harris, to Mark Twain and William Faulkner, and other post-bellum southern writers; and (5) a well-organized comprehensive bibliography, including dissertations, titled "Humor of the Old Southwest: A Checklist of Criticism." This volume therefore constitutes a kind of handbook for the student of the students of frontier humor, though it needs reinforcement, for instance, with the excellent four annual volumes of The Lovingood Papers, edited by Ben Harris McClary from 1962 to 1965, which contain original articles on Harris and Sut. The most celebrated piece reprinted here is Edmund Wilson's "Poisoned!," originally published in The New Yorker, wherein the critic expresses his disgust at Sut as "a peasant squatting in his own filth." Another bonus is Edgar Allen Poe's review of Georgia Scenes (1835), the cornerstone of
frontier humor. Poe gave the paperbound book an enthusiastic sketch-by-sketch summary in the waggish, conversational style of the humor itself, and heralded it as "a sure omen of better days for the literature of the south." (This piece is the only nineteenth-century essay reprinted by Inge.)

Throughout the book contributors make reference to folklore and oral storytelling. In his Introduction Inge writes:

... a certain folk custom was crucial to the actual creation of this literature. This was the favorite frontier pastime of telling stories. Wherever the frontiersman found himself, resting by the campfire, traveling by boat on the river, loafing around the stove at the local tavern or grocery, or relaxing at home before the fireside, he whiled the hours away pleasantly engaged in vigorous "yarnspinning".

Inge then quotes Walter Blair that "much of this literature had its origin in the greatest American folk art--the art of oral story-telling." And where have the folklorists been while the literary scholars have been examining and exhuming this sub-literature? Not one professional folklorist--whom I will define as a person with a Ph.D. in Folklore who cites the motif-index--appears among the contributors. In a bizarre act of intellectual exclusion, the new journal Studies in American Humor announced in its opening editorial that it would not accept articles on folklore. So the folklorists are losing their claim by default.

The field of southwestern humor is a classic exhibit for the need of folklore-in-literature experts. As the concept of American folklore expands to cover personal experience stories and local characters and customs, the rewards for the folklorist who scrutinized these writings will multiply. Forgotten heroes of oral legend can be dredged from these writings, as John Q. Anderson, who comes closest to folklorist status of the critics represented, suggests in his article on "Mike Hooter--The Making of a Myth." But hostile critics can denigrate legend, as James A. Shackford does in "David Crockett, the Legend and the Symbol," where he draws a distinction between the noble David, true symbol of the pioneer spirit, and the spurious Davy created from the "veritable mare's nest of fictional tall tales" in the Crockett almanacs. Folklorists who read these selections--and they should--will come away crying for a piece of the action.