Heaven on Horseback: Revivalist Songs and Verse in the Cowboy Idiom, by Austin and Alta Fife.
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Reviewed by Thomas Adler.

This small volume is worthy of particular attention. It is the first monograph of the Western Texts Society Series, and it may foreshadow the future productions of that society. Moreover, it deals with the overlap and interaction of two important aspects of Anglo-American culture. Perhaps it is not theoretically daring, but it is interesting and extremely readable, and those are characteristics too frequently lacking in topical collections.

The purpose of this collection is the documentation and systematic display of songs and verse which illustrate the "interaction between sacred and popular secular music in the frontier environment...." The forty-nine examples (and a few variants and composites) are presented in seven parts, of which the first six suggest a continuum of interaction, from secular to sacred expressions. The first three parts contain cowboy and western songs into which some religious elements have been introduced, the next two show still more religious intrusion, and group VI presents the injection of western elements into songs which are basically religious. The final part of the text contains nine examples of "decadent" or "Hollywood" cowboy revivalist song.

The presentation of materials, thus, is quite clear and straightforward. Still, I am vaguely disquieted by a feeling that the arrangement of those first six parts may misleadingly suggest an actual historical transformation of cowboy and western materials through time - the sort of thing which might be concluded if one song had been traced through the changes shown in those six groups. I am sure, however, that the presentation of songs in a continuum is intended only to prove extensive "spillover from one category to another."

A second source of disquiet is the conspicuous lack of bibliography. The notes to both introduction and songs are fascinating, but one feels abandoned by the authors at the conclusion of part VII. I don't mind the omission of overt conclusions, particularly in a concise work in which the stated purpose is documentation, but the total elimination of bibliography with no explanation is academic cold-turkey of the cruelest sort.

Still, it is an enjoyable book. The songs and verse make fascinating reading, particularly for those who enjoy baroque symbolism (e.g., God as "Boss of the Riders"). The authors' ability to compile a delightful group of songs and poems in the cowboy idiom is obvious. Although it must disappoint those folklorists who demand a conspicuous theoretical framework, Heaven on Horseback marks a significant beginning for the Western Texts Society Series.

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