

REVIEW ESSAYS

A History of Material Culture?

Warren E. Roberts
Indiana University

Norman J.G. Pounds. **Hearth and Home: A History of Material Culture.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. Pp. x + 437, photographs, illustrations, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index. \$57.50 cloth.

Norman J.G. Pounds set himself the task of writing "a history of the ways in which human beings in the Western world have satisfied their fundamental needs for food, shelter, and clothing," a history covering Europe from the Ice Age to the present century.

If Pounds has failed, it is largely because of the unmanageable proportions of his task. On a single point, the number of large cities in Europe in the late Middle Ages, he states, "any such study which purports to cover the whole of Europe is fraught with immense difficulty. The evidence is too uncertain and discontinuous" (286). Unfortunately, the same could be said for almost every topic he covers. The primary research has not been done. Indeed, the lack of written records, the unreliability of those which do exist, and the ever-present possibility of misinterpreting them mean that the primary research often simply cannot be done. So the writer who attempts to discern broad trends and to make sweeping generalizations is hamstrung from the very start.

As a further example of the unreliability and inadequacy of the written record, Pounds himself says when dealing with the foods consumed in the nineteenth century, "It is the diet of the humbler classes, who must have made up three-quarters of the population, about which there is the greatest uncertainty" (391). If it is impossible

to tell us with any certainty what three-quarters of the population ate in the nineteenth century, how can Pounds hope to tell us with certainty what they ate in earlier centuries? What happens, then, to the claim on the cover flaps that the book "takes us inside peasant cottages and . . . looks at meal planning" or that the book is "a history of the ways in which human beings in the Western world have satisfied their fundamental needs for food . . ."?

Another handicap that Pounds suffers from when he tries to deal with the common people, the overwhelming majority of the population, is that he occasionally displays an elitist bias. When he tells us that "Silk weaving was never an occupation of the peasantry. It called for delicate hands and a finesse . . ." (306), or that, in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most middle-class homes had pictures on their walls and that "Most were religious, or at least moral, in tone, and many were pictorially in deplorable taste" (383), we hear the voice of the elitist, convinced that "peasants" could never have delicate hands or finesse and that the "bourgeoisie" usually has "deplorable taste."

Yet another problem concerns documentation, for Pounds is constantly stating facts or making statements that purport to be factual. On the one hand, it is impossible to footnote every sentence yet, on the other hand, the reader is constantly puzzled by statements Pounds makes, and wishes to know what evidence supports the statements. For example, when Pounds describes a period covering centuries and states that "violence was as frequent within the family as in the society beyond its limits" (4), he makes a very serious charge, yet he presents no scrap of evidence to support this generalization nor any reference to any published source. The person who would challenge the assertion is left without any way to do so.

Another example: Pounds states that "in small and dispersed settlements . . . Plowing, harvesting, house and barn raising were individual, not communal activities" (118). I would say that in the nineteenth century, the population of southern Indiana consisted largely of small and dispersed settlements, yet on the basis of fieldwork and interviews I can state that harvesting and house and barn raising were usually communal and not individual activities. Indeed, one may wonder how an individual could raise a barn frame alone. Yet Pounds makes his claim for all of Europe over a period of centuries and presents not a scrap of evidence or a source to buttress his assertion.

There are many statements made throughout the book that seem, at best, arguable; and there are questionable omissions and emphases. The seriousness of these flaws varies greatly. At one extreme is a

statement to the effect that European farmers did not smoke food as a way of preserving it because they did not have the masonry to build smokehouses (171). One would have thought that Pounds' long residence in Indiana would have caused him to notice that most Indiana farms have smokehouses of wooden frame construction. He also states that "Baking was extremely difficult and could be done only by brushing the hot ashes aside and placing the food—most often bread—on the hot stone of the hearth, and covering it with an inverted bowl, over which the ashes could again be heaped" (194-95). Pounds must be thinking of the type of bread loaf produced by twentieth-century commercial bakeries, not the flat bread or oatcake type of bread that actually was the staff of life for most people over the centuries.

More serious, however, are such matters as his statement that European colonization was "profoundly beneficial" to the native populations (408). I wonder what a Native American would make of such a claim. He also seems to have made no use of any folklife journals and, therefore, no use either of folklife research. (At least, no folklife journal is cited in any footnote.) It is, perhaps, for this reason that transhumance, so important to so many people over so many centuries, is given such short shrift (two pages out of 412), while the "Urban Way of Life," which accounts for a tiny percentage of the entire population, receives fifty pages. Of course, it is because some written records are available for city dwellers but almost none for small farmers. In the same vein, cooperative labor in the countryside receives little attention even though it occupied much of the time of country folk, while factories are treated in some detail even though they assumed importance only at the very end of the time period covered. Again, this is the result of approaching the subject as a historian, using written records but, in the process, losing perspective as to what is important. But if there are problems for the reader with countless details, these problems fade into insignificance in comparison to the general conclusions to be drawn from the work. If we ask, what were peasants or farmers—90 percent or so of the population—really like, Pounds answers either directly or indirectly that they were nasty and brutish, always quarreling, hostile towards neighbors, prone to violence, especially within the family circle, hopelessly superstitious and stupid, backward, incapable of any progress themselves and often hostile towards the benevolent aristocrat who tries to introduce "progress." In short, this is exactly what the elitist and the intellectual have been telling us all along. Much of what Pounds says he makes no attempt to document; some of what he

says must be attributed to a willingness to accept as the whole truth written records that are incomplete, inadequate, misleading, and open to misinterpretation.

A flaw of especial concern for folklorists in Pounds' analysis is found in his treatment of the "spiritual" culture of the "peasant" in medieval and later times. Pounds presents the thesis derived from such Victorian and Edwardian writers as Mannhardt, Frazer, and Lang that medieval peasants spent much of their time huddled around fires peering out with fear-stricken hearts into a surrounding darkness filled with malevolent spirits, and that much of the rest of the peasants' lives was devoted to rituals in the form of festivals and dances designed to propitiate these spirits. Further, this thesis insists that later the festivals and dances persisted thanks to the mindless conservatism of the peasant, though the original meaning was forgotten. Moreover, it was the task of the armchair scholar to "explain" the original "animistic," "totemistic," or "fertility" significance of the ritual.

Most contemporary students of folklife have long since discarded the whole superstructure of Frazerian "interpretations" and view the peasant and small farmer as incredibly hard-working, common-sense folk with a great store of practical wisdom enabling them to raise varied crops, domesticate animals, practice complex crafts, and generally survive in a hostile environment despite the handicap of a blood-sucking aristocracy. Not too much blame should be assigned Pounds in this connection. More blame falls on the shoulders of folklorists and folklife researchers who have not clearly repudiated the theories and conclusions of Frazer and his ilk and offered a more sensible picture of early life.

The question that followers of Frazer must be asked is this: If one's beliefs determine one's actions, how can people survive in an unyielding environment if their beliefs are all erroneous, consisting of irrational fears and stupid superstitions? Can a blacksmith, for example, whose only beliefs about fire and iron are all false, hammer out useful artifacts at his forge? Of course he couldn't. Blacksmiths had, actually, a great range of information about iron and how its characteristics could be changed by using the correct amount of heat, information that today's intellectual certainly lacks. However, because that intellectual, like Gilbert and Sullivan's modern Major-General, "knows the kings of England and can quote the fights historical from Marathon to Waterloo in orders categorical," he considers his knowledge important and the blacksmith's insignificant, and feels he can sneer at the blacksmith as an uneducated "peasant."

In the final analysis, it must be said that Pounds set himself a task so immense that he was doomed to failure from the outset. His difficulties were compounded in that he approached his task burdened with prejudices and hampered by an uncritical trust in the written records which leave in utter darkness about 90 percent of those he purports to describe.

Instead of trying to describe the medieval small farmer by using only pitifully inadequate and misleading documents, I believe we would do better if we tried to picture the life of the small farmer of *recent* centuries and his family and community, relying mainly on fieldwork, interviews, and an analysis of their material culture. Once that picture is in reasonably clear focus, we can then try to study earlier centuries to see how well that picture fits the scanty written data that is available.