BOOK REVIEWS

Dorson, Richard M. The British Folklorists: A History; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968. 518 pp. Index, Bibliography. $12.50.
Dorson, Richard M. (editor). Peasant Customs and Savage Myths: Selections from the British Folklorists; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968. 2 vols. Vol. 1, 402 pp., Vol. 2, pp. 403-751. Index. $17.95

The academic study of folklore in Britain owes its heritage, as Professor Dorson reminds us, to the British interest in antiquities from the seventeenth century onward. National sentiment, as early as the reign of Elizabeth I, played a major role in the quest for evidence of England's historic past, a quest which later was to evolve into an organized academic investigation of such a wide range of phenomena that its nineteenth century devotees would, in all likelihood, no longer recognize it. This is a most fortunate development.

One of the major characteristics of nineteenth century folklore scholarship was its atomistic approach to the study of traditional survivals. This is evident not only in the plethora of collectanea but also in the scholarly definitions of folklore, which consisted primarily of lists that parallel the classical poetic catalogues of ships and flowers in their length and detail. Even today many of the contributions to the "definition game" still retain much of the earlier "pebble-counting" attitude toward the field. It is only very recently that folklorists themselves have come to see their own field as a dynamic and extremely important aspect of human behavior. For some inexplicable reason, scholars in other areas, such as anthropology and psychology, came to this realization much earlier and began to examine folklore as an integral part of human life.

Professor Dorson's voluminous contribution to folklore scholarship, The British Folklorists: A History, will no doubt become a standard reference work for students in folklore. For this reason it should be carefully examined by students of the field, with close attention paid to its form as well as its content. For it is Professor Dorson's style, even more than the content of his work, which reveals his position as a proponent of the continuing tradition of an atomistic approach to the study of expressive culture. One cannot criticize the author for any lack of detail in his work. Indeed, almost twenty years of his life were dedicated to discovering the facts behind the birth and growth of folklore in Britain. However, it is precisely within this abundance of detail that even the enthusiastic reader may occasionally find himself mired. The over-all development of the discipline of folklore is often lost to the reader in the profusion of interesting but minor names, titles, and quotations.

Another stylistic peculiarity in the book creates a difficulty in the mind of this reviewer. It seems as if the author's many years of investigation have somehow influenced his style of writing itself. Unlike that of his previous works, the prose of The British Folklorists appears couched in the literary style of the nineteenth century, a factor which often creates, at least for this reader, a problem of distinguishing between the author's own commentary and that of his subjects. A striking example of this confusion occurs at the beginning of the chap-

ter on "The Overseas Folklorists":

> Unlike Australia and Africa, the homes of savages, India offered the special charm of an ancient high culture lurking behind the nineteenth-century realities of Hindu village castes and aboriginal hill tribes. (pp. 333-334)

Is it Professor Dorson or the nineteenth century folklorists who espouse the attitude that indigenous Australians and Africans are savages and that India's ancient culture is charming? The author makes no distinction. In fact, the book is fraught with ornate and overgenteel phrases that are now regarded as the hallmarks of Edwardian literature. The question that arises, then, is this: has the author attempted to return himself to the period under discussion and narrate it as a contemporary, or has he written a modern critical history? One is left in doubt.

A final stylistic comment is in order. In his understandable enthusiasm for revealing the personalities of the men who made folklore an object of study in Britain, the author appears to have lost something of his sense of proportion. Granted that the book is entitled The British Folklorits: A History and not British Folklore: A History, but one nevertheless expects---justifiably, this reader feels---that the book's primary focus be the "birth and growth of the idea of folklore and the magnetism in that idea for many powerful minds in diverse callings..." (p. v) rather than the birth and growth of the men who studied it and their magnetism for each other. While it is undeniably imperative to understand the motivations of and relationships among the British folklorists, it is also equally important to understand how the ideas of these men were related to the intellectual framework in which they lived. In choosing to make his work primarily a history of the personalities in British folklore research, the author has sacrificed the important and illuminating examination of folklore in relation to other, more recognized, intellectual pursuits of the period. While the first paragraph of the first chapter informs the reader that William Thoms'

> successors explored the subject with an intellectual vigour and brilliance that excited all England in the later Victorian dacades (p. 1),

the author uses little of his wealth of detailed information to elucidate and substantiate this point. Of the relatively small clique that constituted the "great team" of folklorists, none were permanently connected with universities, as Professor Dorson points out. (p. 204) Who then, beside amateur folklorists and those anthropologists who had studied folkloric material even before the work of the "great team," were really "excited" by the work of these men? The author deals rather extensively with Walter Scott and W. B. Yeats, but these artists, steeped in their cultural traditions, were exceptions to the rule in nineteenth century literature. Fleeting mention is made of Matthew Arnold, regarding his part in the establishment of a chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford, but little is said of the relationship between the folklorists, Arnold and the Celtic Revival.

This is not to say, however, that Professor Dorson has totally ignored the social and political context surrounding the British folklorists. On the contrary, he presents an excellent and fascinating picture of the

controversy surrounding Edward Clodd's presidential addresses to the Folk-Lore Society in 1895 and 1896. Here the somewhat suspect theories of evolutionism and the doctrine of survivals came face-to-face with the righteous force of Victorian Christianity. New friends and new enemies were made; among the latter was William Gladstone, whose fourth term as Prime Minister had just ended. Gladstone's resignation from the Society, written in 1896, reveals much of the tension that existed at the time between the academic proponents of evolutionism and their non-academic contemporaries.

It is in this area of nineteenth century evolutionary theory that Professor Dorson excells, both as an historian and as a critic. His earlier work on the subject (cf. "The Eclipse of Solar Mythology," JAF, 68 [1955], 393-416) is here expanded into an examination of Tylorian evolutionism and its effect on the British folklorists and their work. Even though the examination is primarily a reiteration of the author's earlier article, it is nevertheless interesting and informative to the student of folklore.

Even the enthusiastic folklorist (and Professor Dorson is evidently one) must objectively---albeit sadly---recognize the fact that folklore scholarship in Britain faded after 1918. In fact, it ceased to be considered an academic pursuit worthy of an independent position in most British universities until relatively recently. But it was the regeneration of cultural identification in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and not simply a sudden new interest in the scholarly pursuit of the subject, that was responsible for the establiishment of such institutions as the Irish Folklore Commission (1935), the Welsh Folk Museum (1946), the School of Scottish Studies (1950) and the Ulster Folk Museum (1958). However, Professor Dorson conveniently pigeon-holes the fading of folklore studies into his two page epilogue, reducing it to a tragic concomitant of World War I. Is this really the case? There is no doubt that other related disciplines flourished in this period. Malinowski's work at the London School of Economics in the early 1920's is just one example. In limiting himself to a two-page discussion of what happened to folklore studies after the war, Professor Dorson has conveniently avoided the more important question of why folklore ceased to be considered scholarship and has yet to be resurrected in England (as opposed to the rest of the United Kingdom).

However, a more crucial issue is at stake in this failure to explain the demise of folklore studies in Britain. For in casually mentioning that, "With the gradual shrinkage of Empire the splendid colonial laboratory of folklore dwindled" (p. 440), Professor Dorson has raised, perhaps unwittingly, a rather disturbing question, one for which his chapter on "The Overseas Folklorists" provides no answer. This is the question of the actual relationship between folklore scholarship and imperialism in Britain at the turn of the century. In what appears to be a rather naive comment, the author states that:

> Two powerful motives impelled the overseas folklorists: a desire to test in a living laboratory the new anthropological hypothesis of Tylor concerning primitive man, and a wish to improve colonial government through a systematic knowledge of subject peoples. Intellectual and administrative ends thus happily coincided, with fortuitous reults for folklore collecting. (p. 333)