

and bluegrass) and the continuing personal, familial, and community esteem of the fiddler's ways.

**Everyman's Book of British Ballads.** Edited by Roy Palmer. Pp. 256, introduction, illustrations, sources and notes, index of titles and first lines. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1980. \$22.50 cloth.

Reviewed by Paul Tyler

Here is yet another anthology of British Ballads, the latest in a publishing tradition that dates back to the appearance in 1566 of **A Handful of Pleasant Delights**. Noting that the "tide of interest has ebbed and flowed many times" since then, the editor raises the question of "why, then, yet another anthology?" The implied answer is that interest in ballads is flowing once again. If so, this book could be a kind of **Tea Table Miscellany** for the 1980's.

The editor claims that the sample of ballads he has brought together is unique in two respects, when compared to previous anthologies. In the first place, he points out that he has included material from Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, as well as from England; secondly, that this collection contains not only traditional ballads, but also broadside and music hall ballads, and some of recent composition. The first claim proves somewhat empty, for the balance of the material included is heavily weighted towards England and Scotland, while Ireland is represented by only twelve items, and Wales by only two. The claim to uniqueness stands up better, for the collection goes beyond the literary elitism of earlier anthologies to give space to a wide variety of types of narrative song. Many different ages and voices are represented here.

Connected with the diversity found in this anthology is a significant message that is never explicitly proclaimed by the editor. The book opens with a quote from the 1910 edition of the **Oxford Book of Ballads**: "The ballad has been dead, or as good as dead, for two hundred years." Yet what follows shows the error of such thinking. Over half of the texts and tunes printed had been collected in the

twentieth century--at least forty had been collected in the last twenty years. The message conveyed is that narrative song is still viable and vital, though the older ballad form and style cherished by earlier scholars may no longer be as popular as they once were.

Aside from questions of purpose, the content of Palmer's anthology offer many treasures to those who will dig through its pages. Admittedly, there is not a great deal here to aid readers who are in pursuit of scholarly objectives. The one hundred twenty-six entries are arranged by theme into nine chapters; e.g., "Tall Stories," "The Supernatural," "Deeds of Daring," and "Cautionary Tales." Each text is accompanied by a tune, and in all but a small number of cases, the text and the tune come from the same source. The listing of sources is generally complete. Headnotes precede each entry, but these are uneven in quality. At times the editor provides a tantalizing account of the life history of a ballad or gives some hint of the song's meaning for its author or performer. For too great a number of entries, however, the headnotes contain only a summary of the plot or the editor's personal interpretation. The headnotes give the overall impression that research has been haphazard. The notes seem almost to be ready-made introductions for performing the songs in folk clubs.

A major weakness in the work is that the ballads are presented as isolated wholes. In only one instance is more than a single variant given. No comparative notes or references are provided. And unfortunately, there is no information given about the informants other than name, year of birth, and hometown or county. Since many of the informants are still living, it would certainly have been possible to have gathered more biographical and indigenous exegetical material that would give the reader a clearer understanding of the social and personal world in which these ballads and ballad singers live.

In conclusion, it seems that this collection is quite good for those who want to know a little bit, but not too much, about British ballads. **Everyman's Book of British Ballads** would be more at home on a coffee table in the living room than on a shelf in a scholar's study.