

TWO LETTERS THAT NEVER GOT PUBLISHED,  
or, FOLKLORE'S CENSORS

There follow, through the courtesy of the editors of FOLKLORE FORUM, the texts of two letters of mine denied publication by the New York Review of Books and the London Times Literary Supplement. These letters are sufficiently self-explanatory but behind them lies a tale. The leitmotif of the tale is that folklorists are often used as punching bags by the grossly ignorant---and almost everybody is ignorant of folklore---but folklorists have a devil of a time punching back. The lords of the press protect their own. When John Gould attacked a piece of mine in the Atlantic Monthly, I was at first given the brushoff by the department editor, Charles Morton, who said that my rejoinder had missed the next month's deadline. Perhaps since Gould had used the word "fraud" in reference to my grant, Morton finally yielded and printed my rebuttal but with sour grace, and he included our correspondence to show that I was strictly an uninvited guest (February, 1959).

The New York Herald-Tribune Books never did print a response I sent to a vicious review of my American Folklore by Kenneth Lynn, which went far beyond the book to malign the whole field of folklore. Lynn called it "the most sentimental of the humanities," surviving only because of munificent foundation subsidies! MacEdward Leach sent in a reply for the American Folklore Society which was printed in a truncated form that, as he said, took all the steam out of it. Lynn was then chairman of the Harvard Committee on Higher Degress in American Civilization, a program which had no folklore offering of any kind. So you have people like Lynn, and the anonymous British anthropologist reviewing in TLS, and the Maine pastoralist John Gould, writing as pundits on folklore, a subject on which they are as ignorant as an unweaned calf.

The lesson, as I see it from thirty years of infighting, is that folklorists must stand on their own feet, get their own Ph.D.'s, have their own departments, control their own journals and monographs, run their own Society and review the books in their field. Fellow-folklorists may condemn books on folklore, and many need to be condemned, but they won't mock the study of folklore. From a strong bastion, folklorists will eventually make themselves heard -- even to the lords of the press.

May 28, 1969

To the Editors [ of the New York Review of Books ]:

In his comments on Gordon Ray's remarks in "Professional Standards and American Editions: A Response to Edmund Wilson," Mr. Wilson says that Percy's Reliques is "a more valuable and more important book" than Child's famed edition of the English and Scottish popular ballads. The context of this astonishing dictum is the question of scholarly standards in editing literary texts, and Mr. Ray has pointed out that animus against scholars existed in other fields, from botany to folklore. I could recite a long and bloody record of encounters with anti-scholars and fakelorists---whose ranks include professional scholars in disciplines other than folklore. No serious subject of learning has been so damaged and polluted by amateurs and charlatans as the one baptized in 1846 by the antiquary William John Thoms, who suggested changing "what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature"

to a "good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore, ---the Lore of the People." The damage is done through the falsification, bowdlerization, and perversion of the orally sung and recited texts of folklore by editors and writers ignorant of elementary scholarly procedures. Many American intellectuals have in consequence of these editorial and publishing practices a wholly erroneous conception of the folk, who are as Thoms said, the people. In the tempered texts of fakelore the folk are seen as quaint, charming, lovable, coy, eccentric, naive, rustic, droll. The door opened by Percy leads in a direct line to the fakelore of Paul Bunyan and Sambo. Scholars---persons with respect for the oral text---have been seeking to close that door against all the pressures of the commercial world, and in the case of the ballad they have succeeded in the great work of Francis James Child.

Child's five volumes are not meant to be read straight through for literary pleasure, although there is a fascination in seeing the variants of a ballad glide one into another. The variants are needed to prove the existence of an oral ballad type. What Child was after was truth first and then art. Percy, and all rewriters of oral texts, disregard the truth of folk tradition for their own conception of art. If Mr. Wilson admires Percy's ballads, he must consider them as literature, not as folklore. Child's ballads are folklore, and if one wants a selection of the most pleasing examples he can go to the one-volume edition of George Lyman Kittredge and Helen Child Sargent. Of course Child himself is deficient; he excluded the music of the ballads, and he failed to represent bawdy versions. These earthy texts would no doubt please Mr. Wilson even less, judging by his squeamish revulsion at the Sut Lovingood Yarns, those splendid specimens of oral storytelling art in the Tennessee hills transmuted into literary art by George Washington Harris, who was long forgotten until scholars rediscovered him. But if ballads and tales of the people are coarse, or tawdry, or silly, scholars accept them as cultural facts, present them as they are for the student of culture, and examine them to see which texts attract the student of oral literature. Some undoubtedly will. The achievement of black Americans and their role in American civilization will never be properly understood until the actual texts of their magnificent oral culture are read or heard in faithful transcription.

In the field of folklore the animus against the "professor" and the "scholar" is especially marked; indeed they are dirty words for pedantic defilers of pretty baubles. Granted there is plenty of futile research and graceless scholarship coming out of the universities. The reviews in the New York Review of Books by Alfred Kazin and Elizabeth Hardwick of the recent biographies of Crane and Hemingway make the point damningly. Nor are texts always sacred. In my own case I have freely edited colonial and Revolutionary narratives, but the original, less readable texts are available elsewhere, and no one is being deceived. In the matter of oral folk literature, where scholarly standards are lax, many readers have been grossly deceived.

[ED. NOTE: The Ray letter and Wilson response to which Professor Dorson refers appear in the June 5, 1969, issue of the New York Review. See also the FORUM of September, 1969, p. 125.]

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FOLKLORE'S HEYDAY

Sir:

Perhaps I can comment on the review of my books, The British Folklorists, A History, and Peasant Customs and Savage Myths, Selections from the British Folklorists (September 18) as an historian of folklore. Reviews of folklore studies frequently run to expressions of bitter hostility or extravagant praise. I could cite many examples, including the volumes above ("magnificent," Telegraph; "admirable," Spectator; "spluttering," Times; "pedantic," TLS). No subject arouses more emotions. Some reviewers are furious that folklore is not what they conceive it to be. In the States they make dreary wisecracks about the "professor" trying to talk with, or about, the folk; now the cracks are doubly dreary about the Yankee professor poaching in England. Because few people are professionally trained in folklore---hardly any in England---qualified reviewers are scarce. Historians customarily review books on history, but anyone can pose as an expert on folklore.

The present reviewer is obviously a British social anthropologist contemptuous of folklore. (Historical explanations for the ignorance of folklore by English anthropologists today are given in an article by Ruth Finnegan in Man, vol. 4, no. 1, 1969, "Attitudes to the study of oral literature in British social anthropology.") His whole lengthy review is a diatribe against folklore studies, from the irrelevant first column ridiculing an article on Easter eggs to the fantastic final statement that the author seems to recognize his enterprise as a funeral rite. He yawns at anything before Tylor, attributes the demise of English folklore to its losing ties with anthropology, makes the customary ritualistic obeisance to Levi-Strauss, and says that "all this seems a very long way from the current interests of British academic anthropologists." So what? Folklorists are not writing for anthropologists, any more than anthropologists are writing for folklorists.

The review is a series of howlers. In his opening sentence Mr. X lists the United States among the countries in which "the study of folklore achieved a status of thoroughgoing academic responsibility"---a delightful transatlantic fantasy. Next he asserts that the Folklore Series of Indiana University Publications is filled with "jargon-loaded semi-mathematical debates," obviously never having looked at most of the twenty-one volumes in the series, which are indexes, bibliographies, and collections. Soon he instructs the officers of the Folk-Lore Society to read Levi-Strauss, casually insulting the distinguished president of the Folk-Lore Society, Dr. Katharine Briggs.

When at length he turns to the books under review, Mr. X remarks that "Professor Dorson...avoids all comment...on their [the folklorists'] relations with one another...." This statement suggests that he has little idea what the books are all about. The history and the selections seek to trace the complex web of interrelationships that bind together the British folklorists from John Brand to Andrew Lang. This in indeed what the books are about: how an incremental body of folklore theory

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at a Bloomington party, was told that two girls from Bennington, Mass., called the European number and were told, "You're on the right track." They haven't been seen since. The Beatles paradise is supposedly on a Greek island. One publication reported that the London directory has no such number, another that an irate old lady answered.

Mrs. MacLaughlin informs us that Toad Hall, a Bloomington furniture and fixtures boutique, had a run on black light bulbs and in fact sold out their entire stock. This in connection with the need to examine one album cover in black light (?) for clues. Her informants told her that the song lyrics "roller coaster" and "silver hammer" refer to the fact that McCartney died from drug use.

Robert J. Adams generated a lively discussion in his large (c. 300 students) Introductory Folklore class and garnered a bulky file of short "texts." Charles Boiles also collected material in one of his folklore classes. At Eastern New Mexico University Rosin Jordan questioned her students about the story. They had heard the rumor but there seems to have been no mass interest on that campus.

Our thanks to Mrs. MacLaughlin, Mr. Adams, Professor Jördan and Mr. Ivey for giving us information. Mr. William Clements, Senior Archivist at the I.U. Folklore Archives informs us that some articles are on file there.

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RESPONSE: ON FOLKLORE BOOK REVIEWS (Cont'd. from p. 166)

nal; you do too many other things too well for that. As for the certain other journals, they'll just have to learn to try harder.

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TWO LETTERS THAT NEVER GOT PUBLISHED (Cont'd. from p. 164)

evolved in England throughout the nineteenth century as a result of personal and intellectual relationships and influences. Of none of this does the reviewer speak, while he goes on about Easter eggs. Again, he says that Professor Dorson fails to remark on the relationship of European colonialism to folklore theory, when Chapter XI, "The Overseas Folklorists," begins with just this obvious point. He follows the assumption, too common among social scientists, that theories of the past are of interest only if they point to currently fashionable ideas.

The reasons for the hostility to folklore so evident in this essay in themselves form a curious chapter in the history of folklore studies. Part of the reasons lie in the misconceptions attached to the word "folklore"; part lie in the disdain of entrenched disciplines toward an outsider. If there were chairs of folklore in British universities, the great tradition of English folklore studies could be maintained without interference from sniggering anthropologists or meddling Yanks.

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