

Puck of the Droms: The Lives and Literature of the Irish Tinkers. By Artelia Court.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. Pp. xv + 297. Notes, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, no price.

Reviewed by Margaret Steiner.

Puck of the Droms, whose title means "trickster of the roads," is a sensitive account by an American folklorist of the lifeways and ethos of Irish tinkers, commercial nomads who have traditionally been regarded as outcasts in Irish society, and hence rarely studied. The book consists of two major sections: the introduction discusses aspects of the tinker world view, places the tinkers in historical context, compares them with other nomadic groups, and describes tinker lifeways as witnessed by the author. The central part of the book consists of the verbatim life histories of Bridget Murphy, Patrick Stokes, and Johnny Cassidy, each of whom exhibited different adaptive responses to the demands placed upon them in Dublin, though they all grew up in the countryside. The narratives are interlaced with a variety of legends, tales, and songs collected from the three informants, as well as from others.

In the introduction, Court suggests some differences in tinker and settled world views which contribute to the hostility and mistrust which prevails between tinkers and settled people. The problem is that while many facets of tinker world view clearly contrast with those of modern urbanites, much of the tinker outlook is shared with Irish peasants and seems characteristic of "the culture of poverty." For example, Court states that tinkers have difficulty dealing with abstract concepts: one either has fifteen pounds to his name or is a millionaire. (I have found similar notions among the settled people with whom I worked in Northern Ireland.) Dif-

ferences in tinker and settled notions of time militated against tinkers getting and maintaining jobs; tinkers believed that "the meaning of time emanated from the singular pattern of an individual's exertions" and that the time taken to do a job was proper to that job (page 5). This view of time was shared by many in rural Ireland, where people's lives are governed by the seasons rather than by the clock.

Tinkers, says Court, were particularly given to drinking and violence, and violence was seen as an expeditious way of dealing with conflicts which could not be adjudicated by external authorities; once the fight was over, the disputants felt no animosity towards one another, and might even join together against another antagonist. Henry Glassie noted this same pattern among the settled folk of Ballymenone. Since much in the world view of tinkers is shared by the Irish peasantry, we cannot look to Court's arguments as explanation for the animosity between tinkers and settled folk historically. Court does not seem to have consulted the standard ethnographies, such as Arensberg and Kimball, or she would have avoided the pitfalls just mentioned. However, she is on much firmer ground in documenting comparisons between tinkers and gypsies. Her copious footnotes refer to works on gypsies in Britain, continental Europe, and America. Although tinkers and gypsies share much in common in lifestyle and occupational choice - cold metal smithery, horse trading, etc. - the author concludes that evidence of common origins is inconclusive at best. She notes that while scholarship on gypsies is abundant, tinkers were not much studied, except for a few early works on Shelta, the tinker language.

After surveying the scholarship, the author goes on to describe tinker lifeways, especially as she observed in the field. Life for tinkers was far from romantic: the low tubular tents

used for sleeping were fire hazards, and children were often the victims. Poor conditions, combined with a general distrust of settled institutions, including health care facilities, meant that malnutrition was rampant and infant mortality rates were high. Everyone in the tinker family contributed toward subsistence: children were often seen begging under the supervision of their mother or an older sister. Women hawked their husbands' tinware, carried messages and vessels needing repair between the camp and settled households, and were always on the lookout for helpful items such as kindling. Sometimes, women developed specialties of their own - the practice of folk medicine, ballad-singing, or fortunetelling. Men were occupied in cold metal smithery and dealing with scrap, horse trading, storytelling, and musicianship, as well as other marginal entrepreneurial ventures. Tinkers had been vitally important in the fabric of Irish rural life; not only did tinkers provide vital services by making and repairing tinware, but as itinerants, they were in a position to be purveyors of news, gossip, and entertainment. Urbanization destroyed this fabric, resulting in even greater displacement of these Irish outcasts.

The three life histories in the central part of the book exemplify differing adaptive responses to life in Dublin: Bridget Murphy embraced whole-heartedly the lifestyle of the settled housewife. She repeatedly urged her husband to support her in the acquisition of a home. Court says that one way in which Bridget differed from the other tinker informants was in her clear separation of personal narratives from legends. Patrick Stoke's presentation, on the other hand, embodies much more clearly the tinker ethos and world view. His memories and supernatural encounters are as real to him as the realm of social workers, and are incorporated into his narrative as such: the story of the "shaving ghost"

is told as an experience which Stokes had as a teenager. The strategy of being "puck of the droms" or con-artist, crops up repeatedly in Stokes' narrative, particularly in his accounts of out-maneuvering (or being out-maneuvered by) the clergy. Details of the life history of Johnny Cassidy, the storyteller, are sparse, since to him the stories were paramount.

Tales and songs in the book are supplemented by documentary footnotes, contributed by Dathi O'Hogain, a folktale specialist at the Irish Folklore Commission, and the Commission's folk-song specialist Tom Munnally. The Type and Motif indices are cited when appropriate, as are the Child and Laws indices, and analogues in other collections. One flaw in the presentation of the tales and songs is their inclusion in a life history, even if not collected from that informant. Court's justification of this practice is an aesthetic one; the practice is an attempt to create an ambiance and to suggest the flow of tinker thought. One would have liked to have seen more explicit connections made between informants' lives and repertoires. In what ways, for example, have differing responses to city life or differences in world view affected what folklore is remembered or highlighted for the collector?

The flaws in Puck of the Droms are more than offset by the sensitive and compassionate accounts of the difficulties between tinkers and their settled compatriots and the host of problems which beset these nomads in a changing Ireland. These excellent narratives will, no doubt, provide the basis for future scholarship.