

URBAN FOLKLORE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

We have in the last few years been devoting increasing attention to folklore collecting in the urban environment; some of us see it as the brave new field experience, untouched, waiting to be mined, now that the rural veins of lore may be petering out. Certainly city collecting offers a great opportunity, but to put things in historical perspective it should be noted that interest in urban folklore and urban folklife is nothing new. True, our emphasis has always been on rural, peasant culture; true, we have only one comprehensive survey of the lore of any American city, Detroit (with another project in Gary, Indiana, being initiated). Yet Victorian Englishmen were pioneering investigations of city tradition a century ago.

Englishmen have long shown a lively interest in the mores of the common people in urban centers, most especially in the great metropolis of London. One need only think of Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens. And, although the inspired Victorian folklorists, who turned their energies to so many subjects, concentrated on the countryside, a few of their contemporaries focused their attention on the city masses. Two men who perhaps stand out were Henry Mayhew and Charles Hindley. Although Mayhew was an editor (he helped found Punch) and social critic, and Hindley an antiquarian seemingly out of touch with any "folklorists" (for example, he published an edition of the Roxburghe Ballads apparently unaware that the Ballad Society was also preparing an edition), both men used methods which prefigure those of present-day folklorists, moreso than many folklorists proper who were working at the same time.

One cannot really consider Mayhew a folklorist even by stretching the imagination. But when he decided to write the series of articles which later became London Labour and the London Poor, he took to the field and asked questions of informants. The result was a valuable mass of data on, among other things, London street life, rich in observations by the folk themselves, and including some information of ballad selling and the milieu in which broadsheet mongers operated.

Hindley, with his consciously antiquarian interests, concentrated his energies chiefly upon folklore scholarship, or what would today be considered such. He was a bookseller and publisher, much taken by the charms of street literature, who in fact at one time printed some pamphlets in the style of chapbooks himself. Although he was engaged in a number of interests and projects, including an edition of the works of the "Water Poet," John Taylor, and a book of ready-made speeches, the recent history of ballad publishing and mongering seems to have received most of his attention. He seems to have been a vigorous field worker and probably made numerous trips to London from his home in Brighton, most especially after his retirement from business in 1864. Hindley was principally interested in the life and work of Jemmy Catnatch, one of the more important broadside printers of the Seven Dials district. But as Catnatch had died by the time Hindley was doing his research, Hindley was forced to reconstruct a certain amount of history from oral sources. He accordingly took to the streets, interviewing the printers, verse writers and sellers who had known Catnatch. Thus, his two books on the subject, The Life and Times of James Catnatch (late of Seven Dials), Ballad Monger, and The History of the Catnatch Press, contain a body of valuable information not only on Catnatch's operations, but on the operations of the ballad industry in general.

In addition to these two works and his excellent collection of broadsides, Curiosities of Street Literature, two of his other books have a decidedly urban folklore flavor. Tavern Anecdotes, a collection of a variety of pub lore, and A History of the Gries of London were, however, put together not through field

research, but by the conventional antiquarian means of snip and paste methods.

Still another work of his is also an interesting prefiguration, this time of the "life history" method of modern folklore studies. The Life and Adventures of a Cheap Jack, published in 1893, is purportedly an autobiographical work by a wandering pedlar, and contains a variety of information and anecdotes of urban and rural lower class life at the time. Hindley claims to have obtained the manuscript from its author, William Green, "one of the fraternity" of cheap jacks. It is, however, occasionally spiced with learned references and one wonders if Hindley made extensive changes or even fabricated the whole thing. He was known to have perpetrated at least one literary hoax, and the book is dedicated to P. T. Barnum. (QUERY: I would appreciate hearing from anyone with information on the genesis of this work.)

Hindley and Mayhew deserve more attention, not merely as valuable sources, but also, from the point of view of history of the discipline, as interesting pioneers. Their own Victorian propensity for observation of city life suggests inherent possibilities for folklore research in the observations of their many contemporaries. Charles Booth's Life and Labour of the People in London, a monumental sociological survey, for example, contains a wealth of information on London lower class life, and the sketches, both verbal and graphic, of the artist Garvani include interesting observations on street musicians and acrobats. I suspect that the writings of other Victorian non-folklorists offer much folklore material and might prove fruitful if systematically investigated.

*Richard M. Dorson has of course written enthusiastically on the work of these men and women, JAF, 64 (1951), 1-10; JAF, 74(1961), 305ff. His major study of the British folklorists is, I believe, in press.

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