

A Role for Folk Life Study in the United States

FOR A FULL-SCALE EXAMINATION of folk life studies in America there are better authorities than myself: Warren Roberts of Indiana, Louis Jones of Coopers-town, Don Yoder of Pennsylvania, or Austin Fife of Utah. Often it has been assumed that my own special interests, medieval literature, ballad and folktale, are a discipline at daggers drawn with those of material culture and folk life. But since of late the conviction has grown upon me that the academic place and function of folk literature in the United States can be greatly advanced by further emphasis on its cultural and material matrices, I make bold to approach the subject as we join in paying tribute to Sigurd Erixon, father of modern folk life study.

Ethnology and folklore cooperate with one another better in Sweden and in Scotland than in the United States. The great research organizations in Scandinavia and the Edinburgh School of Scottish Studies have, in a way almost unknown in this country, combined the study of language, folk literature, folk music and dance, material culture, and ethnology in model fashion. Here we usually assume that "ethnology" is a part of the academic discipline of anthropology, which makes no very sharp distinction between the indigenous mores of Western Europe and America and the far-flung cultures, primitive and civilized, throughout the world. In recent years "area" studies, which combine anthropology with economics, history and language, have mushroomed throughout the universities, lured by government money and the crusading spirit of a dominant nation attempting without too much grace to be the world's policeman and father figure. Despite attempts at "American studies programs", which are less scholarly than pedagogical, the glance is outward rather than inward. Such anthropologists as might be tempted to study the indigenous Anglo-Saxon culture of their country, are understandably distracted by the manifold Indian cultures which are much more justly called indigenous. Swedish ethnologists have been properly concerned with the Lapps and Scottish students with Highland Gaels, but their interest has not obscured the relationship between these no longer dominant cultures and that which, for better or worse, now rules the roost. In America we have the further problem, so far barely comprehended, of the role the "minority" cultures: Negro, German, Polish, Irish, Jewish, Chinese and Japanese, which surely by now outnumber the basic WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) substratum of the population, if you take them all together. Though the country still holds to ideals set by John Locke and John Knox and John Milton and John Bull, it often seems of late to have turned rather to those of Sam Goldwyn, Adam Clayton Powell, Lucky Luciano, the Marquis de Sade, and Mao Tse Tung than to those of its own culture heroes or to Maimonides, Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskiöld, Molière or Confucius. I note I have no Scandinavian among the sinners; perhaps that is a very good sign.

We see, then, that anthropologists incorporate ethnology without paying it proper respect. They have too many tasks, we may admit, to look kindly upon the "folk life" of their own country; and thus they turn the task over the sociologists and social workers, who of late have been more concerned with the exploding urban cultures, and less with older ethnological traditions, including folklore. There is such a thing as "rural sociology", but as the farm grows more and more of an industrial combination and less a way of life, tradition becomes at best mere nostalgia, at worst a form of reactionary escapism. This is not to say that American anthropo-

logists have wholly ignored their own country. Boas studied the body forms of European and American Jews, and discovered that improved diets seemed to correlate with greater stature. Ruth Benedict used her knowledge of Pacific and American Indian cultures to demonstrate how we could better understand our own "patterns of culture", and Margaret Mead has been a distinguished follower of hers. Melville Herskovits, skilled student of the cultures of Africa and the Caribbean, became an ardent defender of the Negro past, a battlecry even now in the midst of America's greatest contemporary dilemma. (But is it significant that a Swede, Gunnar Myrdal, is the major student of that dilemma.) Clyde Kluckhohn, influenced perhaps by sociologists like his wife Florence and Talcott Parsons, both on the Harvard staff, never forgot the importance of studying the relationship between subculture and dominant culture, or of using anthropological methods on the ethos of one's own day and place.

The American Folklore Society, convinced that anthropologists and folklorists stemming from a philological background should work together, has tended to divide its officers between the two. Though this practice has value, it depends too much on academic chances and those of temperament, and it is unfortunately based on the belief that folklore is a subordinate discipline with no status of its own. In Europe it is easier to set up an institute and a discipline around a single man, and let him come up with the pot of gold east of the sun and west of the moon. In the States, the "teaching department" is the center of organization, and one man's special interests cannot be allowed to rule. Hence anthropology and English literature, once generous hosts of "folklore" and "ethnology", have tended to become more and more preoccupied with whatever they define at the moment as their own more relevant affairs: kinship systems or the contemporary novel.

The way out in this country has been the "Center" or "Institute", which stresses research but as usual pays for itself by teaching. We grow increasingly proud of such organizations: the Center for Folklore and Mythology at the University of California at Los Angeles under Wayland Hand, the Folklore Institute under Stith Thompson and Richard Dorson, the Folklore Division of the Graduate School at Pennsylvania under the late MacEdward Leach, Tristram Coffin, and Don Yoder. Less developed but active are incipient centers at Wayne State, Berkeley, Texas, North Carolina, Ohio State and a host of others.

Students now are beginning to take their doctoral degrees in Folklore and not in some folkloristic aspect of language or anthropology. Full of ambition, this younger group believes theory to be the center of scientific progress, and it is impatient of half-truths like the oral and rural nature of folk literature, the ballad canons of Child and Grundtvig, the search for folktale archetypes, the humane and individual rather than the social. They seek a broad base of culture, including the mass media, and they are preoccupied with urban and college protest songs, Propped up structural approaches to the folktale, folklore as process and as a factor in the solution of both urban and rural ills. Roger Abrahams' "Deep Down in the Jungle" and Alan Dundes's "The Morphology of the American Indian Folktale" are significant expressions of these dedicated new students. Any student of an older generation who says their work is immature may be betraying that he has himself not grown up to the times. The time thus is ripe for more attention to the actual culture which surrounds the

folk artifact, and folk life, which might have been thought irrelevant to a department of English or even of anthropology, has a place to go at last.

WHEN AMERICAN SCHOLARS VISIT STOCKHOLM with its *Institutet för Folklivsforskning*, or to Edinburgh with its *School for Scottish Studies*, one finds a richness and cohesion of interest and purpose which appears enviable. Some of the cohesion is due to the more homogeneous nature of the country — the absence of the "melting pot". Nationalism in Sweden and Scotland is neither as frightening nor as limiting as it is in a country as massive as the United States. In one sense the United States has no nationalism; we are too composite, and the mixture of ideals of which I have spoken leads too often to cynicism and hypocrisy. In another sense we are too nationalistic, for being aware of our own heterogeneous nature we are apt to take offense at the slightest hint that we do not love our country deeply, and to make jingoistic displays which ultimately embarrass us, within and without our borders. Such extreme nationalism, a sporadic affair, is no basis for the genuine study of our institutions. Nevertheless, American history and literature are expensively and extensively studied, since they can broadly absorb writers of varying origins like Emerson and Dreiser and Fitzgerald and Malamud and Baldwin, and statesmen of similar varying provenience like Washington, Jefferson, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.

It has been harder for American folklorists to handle the melting pot. Thelma James at Wayne State has worked to gather the immigrant folklore of Detroit, and recent publications in Polish ballads and Armenian folktales are a testimony to the devotion of her students. Since Joel Chandler Harris the Negro has attracted students, and Richard Dorson's tale-tellers from Arkansas and Michigan and the Lomaxes' Leadbelly have become central figures in our work. Some authorities, like Archer Taylor, believe that immigrant lore is not a subject for American folklore but an extension of the lore of the mother country. That is why we look with such excitement at the work of Stephen Erdely and Linda Degh, native Hungarians who learned their trade in Budapest and who can transfer the ballad techniques of Kodály and the folk-tale techniques of Kálmány to the study of Hungarian immigrants in this country. Or to Jonas Balys, who has published his Lithuanian collections here and provided us with the boast that there is a greater scholarly literature of Lithuanian folk narrative in America than in Lithuania.

In its new surroundings this literature vanishes rapidly, and for better or worse some of us believe that the English, Scottish and Irish heritage, expanded by the German and the Negro, are the major continuities of folk literature in the States. Folk life and material culture has a greater staying power, even in the midst of technological change, and its importance for the understanding of all groups, WASP, immigrant and "minority", is that it can give a major purpose and direction to our science and our scientists. These are some of the advantages I can see in increased attention to such matters, without any diminution of interest in oral literature itself:

1. It is hard to place men trained only as students of folk literature, since they are apt to be first welcomed by literary departments, and then ignored, converted,

and misunderstood. There is a much larger outlet for students of material culture, for every state has a major historical museum and many smaller ones. If more of these museums had as directors men trained equally in history and in folklife and in folk literature, the cause of folk literature would itself be greatly enhanced.

2. Film and television, which can do something with a folktale or a ballad, can do much more with material object and custom, which are more visualizable. Bruce Buckley has seen the importance of educational programs of the kind in New York and Indiana, and since educational television is a byword today, the field is fallow.

3. Though we have long envied Stockholm's magnificent Skansen, we are at least beginning to have professionally run open air museums; a major example is the Farm Museum at Cooperstown, New York, which even its informed and inspired director, Louis Jones, would admit gets mixed up a bit with the Baseball Hall of Fame and the homestead of James Fenimore Cooper, but which is a research and educational institution as well as a pleasure for the people. Indeed it has pioneered in showing us that a Museum can be both. Colonial Williamsburg, the California missions, the inner cities being restored in Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans and Columbus, all demonstrate that history and folk life can combine in a heterogeneous nation to preserve old customs and old architecture. Even Disneyland has its nostalgic country streets and ice-cream fountains. Just now we are all being asked to contribute to the preservation of the National Colonial Farm at Accokeek, Maryland, and in connection with this a symposium is being held at Washington and Mount Vernon on Eighteenth Century agricultural science (October, 1967). It would appear that Folk Life and Madison Avenue are finally getting together.

4. The study of folk life need not be parochial, WASP in nature. Material culture has continuities with other roots than those in England and Scotland. As a boy I lived in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where French Canadian and Swede and Irishman mingled, all led to the area by its mines and forests. Of late, as Richard Dorson has shown, the Finns have become important elements in the population. I used to admire the cosy basement living quarters of the Swedes, with their steamy kitchens and warm living rooms, which made use of natural ground heat in the winter and of natural ground coolness in the summer. Our neighbours, many of whom worked for my father at the electric power and streetcar company, built their own houses, farmed and raised chickens in the middle of town, and slowly progressed towards college educations for their children and major community status. It was not until I visited Sweden that I discovered that the basement living quarters were not a sudden adaptation to the Northern cold in the United States, but had a long history in Sweden. I now live in a "four-level split", a common modern form of suburban architecture, in which one level is underground with air-wells and another is half underground. Just how modern architects arrived at this kind of dwelling needs study, but in its ancestry should certainly be the Swedish basement living quarters and the sod-house of the American prairie states, best known in Nebraska and the Dakotas. Similar continuities are French ironwork in New Orleans, Italian pizza and spaghetti, Chinatown art, Mormon haystacks, Pennsylvania Dutch barns, and eighteenth-century manor farm ceilings and gates and doors from England; in such continuities spiritual culture and material culture are mingled.

It is probable that the best work of this kind will have its beginnings in the humble regional journals. In the June 1967 issue of the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* I read an excellent account of "Hay-Making Terms in Perry County" by Kelsie Harder, and in the Spring 1967 issue of the *Journal of the Ohio Folklore Society* was another, by William Schreiber, on "The Pennsylvania Dutch Barn in Ohio". Men in academic life are discovering the riches of rural life despite the allure of our cities. Once we acquire better techniques and organization for the study of folk life, our schools and colleges may be able better to emulate Stockholm, Lund, Leeds, Edinburgh, and Oslo. The American city dweller who has deserted the farm needs strength from his material past as much as the Greek immigrant does far from Athens or the Jew rediscovering Hassidic lore in New York. Material culture is not merely rural, of course, and there is a rich harvest of industrial folklore to be reaped also, as our 1966 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Boston showed. In the common search for a past which is both material and spiritual university departments and institutes may regain a totality of interest which should never have been separated out from the life of the people. Something is needed to cure modern alienation, so self-defeating to society, artist, and mere human being, and the combination of folk life and custom, material culture, folk literature and rite into its proper whole again is at least one means for appeasing the hungers of the alien in the New World and in the world as a whole.

L'étude des modes de vie actuels du peuple

LES ANNÉES QUI ONT SUIVI LES DEUX GUERRES MONDIALES ont amené de profonds changements dans la vie des hommes. En premier lieu, un extraordinaire développement de la technique, ensuite, un accroissement considérable des connaissances chez les masses populaires, et, enfin, la structure sociale a subi, elle aussi, d'importantes modifications. La participation dans les armées européennes de grandes masses de soldats appartenant à des peuples coloniaux, les fronts de guerre si distants de 1914 à 1945 (et même de nos jours) ont contribué dans une large mesure à une connaissance mutuelle plus étroite entre peuples européens et exotiques. Nul doute que ces connaissances géographiques et ethniques accrues ont eu leur répercussion sur la conscience des combattants, de l'homme ordinaire.

Les guerres ont provoqué chez certains peuples sur le plan social des tensions, des commotions et des réalisations décisives. La Révolution d'octobre en Russie et ses conséquences, la socialisation des pays de l'Europe Orientale, de certains pays de l'Asie et même de l'Afrique, sont une preuve suffisamment évidente des profonds changements survenus dans la conscience de l'homme — idées démocratiques, conception d'un monde où l'homme défend son droit à une indépendance toujours plus entière.

En raison de ces faits (ou peut-être indépendamment d'eux), nous constatons dans le monde un essor extraordinaire de la technique et de l'industrialisation: les métiers manuels et les petites fabriques cèdent le pas à d'énormes entreprises industrielles, la science technique conduit à la construction de machines cybernétiques. Au développement de la grande industrie est étroitement lié l'afflux des populations rurales vers les grands centres urbains dans presque tous les pays du monde. La mécanisation des travaux agricoles libère le paysan du labeur de la glèbe, la collectivisation des biens ruraux le détache de la terre. Depuis la dernière guerre, chaque ville a élargi sa zone industrielle qui a englobé les villages environnants et englouti une nouvelle population venue de provinces lointaines. En même temps, l'éducation générale s'accroît et s'élargit par les soins de l'école, de la radio, de la télévision, du cinéma, de la presse, du tourisme, etc. Presque chaque citoyen a une montre au poignet, on use de transports en commun même sur de courtes distances, et du téléphone à chaque moment, l'éclairage et le chauffage central sont assurés à des localités et à des pays entiers, la cuisine se fait à l'électricité. Si ces transformations se sont effectuées dans le monde capitaliste peu à peu et depuis plus longtemps, dans le monde socialiste de l'Europe Orientale, le rythme de cette évolution est incomparablement plus accéléré, un rythme qui brise sans retour les liens avec le passé.

Aujourd'hui, la plupart des sciences dites *humanitaires* ne retiennent que fort peu l'attention des gouvernements. C'est là un fait sur lequel il ne faut pas que nous fermions les yeux. Les raisons en sont évidentes: leur rendement économique et politique est, on peut le dire, nul. De toutes ces sciences, c'est la plus jeune de toutes, l'ethnologie, qui est au plus mal. Ce côté le plus intime de l'histoire de l'humanité, cette source la plus importante de connaissances sur l'évolution culturelle de l'homme ne peut rivaliser dans la compétition pour la supériorité technique, économique et politique sur la terre. Et si cette science existe toujours, elle le doit à ses peu nombreux adeptes qui lui ont consacré le meilleur de leurs forces. Il est inutile de faire ici une comparaison entre les investissements et les subsides accordés aux instituts de