

Gerald PORTER, *The English Occupational Song* (Umea, University of Umea, 1991 (distr. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell), 184 p. ("Umea Studies in the Humanities", 105), ISBN 91- 7174-649-8, ISSN 0345-0155)

Lucy A. Powell

Volume 16, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083322ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083322ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Powell, L. A. (1994). Review of [Gerald PORTER, *The English Occupational Song* (Umea, University of Umea, 1991 (distr. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell), 184 p. ("Umea Studies in the Humanities", 105), ISBN 91- 7174-649-8, ISSN 0345-0155)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(1), 241–243. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083322ar>

Le regard de ces autobiographies apporte des éléments pour un approfondissement des questions liées à la représentation de «soi» et des «autres», mais aussi à celles qui inscrivent les gens dans un mouvement de redéfinition et de refaçonnement de la société. Les narrateurs n'en adoptent pas moins un point de vue critique qui pourrait faire penser à une tolérance suspecte. Ils ne se sont pas limités à décrire leurs expériences, mais se sont efforcés aussi d'en faire un bilan qui identifie tant les éléments de continuité que les éléments de rupture. À la fin de l'exploration des récits, on reste un peu surpris, non pas de la différence d'intérêt et surtout de niveau entre les diverses contributions, mais surtout des types de discours ou de pratiques répertoriables. L'intérêt certain de la constitution d'un corpus des récits comme ceux que donne ce livre est de fournir la base de matériaux qui permet de construire une réflexion, qu'elle soit ethnologique ou historique.

Martin KALULAMBI PONGO
CÉLAT, Université Laval
Sainte-Foy, Québec

Gerald PORTER, *The English Occupational Song* (Umea, University of Umea, 1991 (distr. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell), 184 p. ("Umea Studies in the Humanities", 105), ISBN 91-7174-649-8, ISSN 0345-0155).

Occupational folklore has been gaining attention in North America recently with the 1991 Labor Song special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (vol. 28, nos. 2/3) and the new book *Songs About Work* edited by Archie Green (Indiana UP, 1993). A welcome addition from the other side of the Atlantic is Porter's thesis, *The English Occupational Song*. Porter's work is a careful blending of evolutionary theory and semiotics applied to songs which mention occupations. His discussion and analysis is based on an examination of over 4 000 texts and recordings of songs covering over 100 different occupations including prostitution, smuggling, and poaching as well as more typical occupations such as mining, weaving, and seafaring. Most of the book, as would be expected in a semiotic study, focuses on work as metaphor or symbol, and how these symbols have changed over time.

Porter divides songs related to occupations into three groups: rhythmic songs, which are performed during work; songs about work but not performed in the work setting, including a large collection of broadside ballads; and labour songs which emerged with unionization. His discussion concentrates on the last

two types. These types are useful, although they are not always as clear in his discussion of particular subjects as they are in the original model.

Porter rightly examines how broadside ballad printers and folksong collectors mediated and commodified the song texts. The song texts studied are often several steps removed from the oral performance, mediated either by the broadside ballad printer or the song collector. With reference to the broadside ballad printers, Porter states, "the broadside market acted as both a powerful initiator of new songs and as a mediator of songs from oral tradition. In both cases the single most important factor was that the song had to be a salable commodity" (33). Broadside publishers also created metaphors which were chosen to serve society and reinforce norms. The song collectors mediated by gathering items in a narrow range and reworking many of the texts.

Porter wisely does not restrict himself to song texts for symbolic analysis of work, but incorporates related items such as the iconography on trade union membership certificates, worker's clothing, and machinery, as well as exploring how all of these are related to the non-work part of the worker's life. The expression of work in a song, he argues, should be seen as symbolic rather than as an accurate representation of working life.

In the core of *The English Occupational Song*, Porter perceptively discusses how specific attributes of occupations are codified. With codification, their symbolism is broadly recognized in general life experiences, such as in courting and in war. The occupational metaphor can take an active or passive role, and can be portrayed either with positive or negative qualities. Sometimes the metaphor, especially if it is part of the machinery or tools of work, takes on an erotic quality.

In his move from occupational to labour songs, Porter convincingly explains how the latter were used to promote group cohesion. Cohesion occurs when there is a growing sense of community among occupational groups. For example, miners, arguably the first group of industrial workers in Britain, gained a sense of community and collective identity through unionization and through the shared experience of pit disasters. Porter does not see community as defined by geographical boundaries, but rather "as a plurality of allegiances, constantly forming and reforming" (103). His application of this account of songs engendering community to the development of women's sense of group identity is particularly illuminating. Early broadside ballads by men portrayed as women as erotic objects. As women started printing, selling, and buying street literature, and, significantly, also working in factories, the songs began to present a less erotic and more empowered image of women workers. In addition, Porter points out that women performers often changed the gender of the typically male protagonist to give many songs a women's perspective.

Porter's indices of occupations and sources are thorough, and will be quite useful to the folksong scholar. Indeed, the extraordinary number of texts Porter

has assiduously unearthed suggests one minor criticism: occasionally he only provides a reference to a song when one would greatly like to see its full text. Should Porter choose to publish an expanded version of this work, the inclusion of a greater number of full song texts would be welcome. Porter's book is an important contribution to the study of occupational folksong, and is highly recommended.

Lucy A. POWELL
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
