

***The Last Chivaree: The Hicks Family of Beech Mountain.* By Robert Isbell. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 174 p., foreword by Wilma Dykeman, selected bibliography, \$30.95 U.S., ISBN 0-8078-2266-3 cloth.)**

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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

The Last Chivaree: The Hicks Family of Beech Mountain. By Robert Isbell. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 174 p., foreword by Wilma Dykeman, selected bibliography, \$30.95 U.S., ISBN 0-8078-2266-3 cloth.)

One of the best known oral traditions of southern Appalachia is the Jack tale. Despite the impression some may have of the ubiquitousness of the genre in the region, almost all of the documented traditional tellers of Jack tales are descendants of the same man, David Hicks, who settled in the mountains of western North Carolina in the eighteenth century. In *The Last Chivaree*, Robert Isbell paints a compelling portrait of the twentieth-century Hickses, focusing especially on the two most famous members of the clan, Ray Hicks and his “double first” cousin, Stanley.

From the outset, former journalist and bank executive Isbell distances himself from scholarly accounts of the Hicks family. The tone is set even in the foreword written by historian Wilma Dykeman. She suggests that it would be inappropriate to describe Isbell’s method as “interviews or oral history,” terms that “evoke a technical approach, an atmosphere of brisk professionalism that is the antithesis of the relationship between this author and his subjects.” Folklorists may well be annoyed by Isbell’s own self-serving portrayal of himself as a friend of the Hickses (while scholars are by implication not friends) and wish that indeed there were some better account of Isbell’s method of recording the verbal art of the Hicks family. These quibbles are mostly forgotten, however, after the opening chapters, when Isbell lets his own persona slip into the background and launches into a readable, and at times disturbing, account of life on and around Beech Mountain.

Robert Isbell’s first encounter with a member of the Hicks family occurred in 1955 when he snapped a photograph of a banjo player at a folk festival. Three decades later, Isbell goes in search of the “lost banjoist” and discovers that he is Stanley Hicks, a storyteller, musician and instrument-maker. The author’s portrait of Stanley, who was at the time of the latter encounter gravely ill, demonstrates the limitation of Isbell’s strictly personal approach. From Isbell’s account the reader might get the impression that Hicks’s spirit was

broken over the decades by hardship and poverty. However, those who met or worked with Stanley Hicks (or have even seen films of him) know that his energy and puckish charm never left him until he was overcome by terminal illness. After Stanley's death, Isbell seeks out cousin Ray, and it is Ray Hicks' life that dominates the pages of *The Last Chivaree*.

Jack tales play a surprisingly minor role in the book. *The Last Chivaree* is mostly a retelling of the personal experience narratives of Ray Hicks and those of his neighbors and family. Isbell's journalistic style is compelling, though one wonders if much of the language and dramatic flourishes are Isbell's or the narrators'. At times, Isbell directly quotes Ray and on occasion renders his stories in an ethnopoetic format with successful results. Although the reader does not get enough of Ray Hicks's own words, Isbell's treatment of Hicks' style of speaking is refreshing. The author does not fall back on stereotypical claptrap about Elizabethan English or even suggest that Hicks' speech is quintessentially Appalachian. Rather he suggests that it is an idiosyncratic and self-chosen combination of individual poetic style and antiquated usage.

Compared to many journalistic and novelistic accounts of life in the southern mountains, *The Last Chivaree* rings true. Isbell honestly portrays the joys and the many sorrows of the Hicks family without over sentimentalizing or romanticizing. Occasionally he lapses into stereotypes. Writing of schoolyard bullying, for instance, Isbell notes that in "the way of their ancestors, mountain children frequently acted out disputes based on clan or family differences" (p. 72). The book is strongest when Isbell sticks to recounting, rather than analyzing, the Hickses' life experiences.

The book ends with a short list of "sources," several of which date from the early twentieth century. No scholarship on Jack tales is listed. Since the book is published by a university press and includes a foreword by a scholar, one wishes that the extra step had been taken to include a truly useful bibliography. Much of the growing scholarship on Jack tales and the Hicks family is accessible to the non-specialist, and the book could have pointed the way for readers who wish to know more about the traditions of Beech Mountain. Even more useful (especially for school teachers) would have been a listing of the recordings, films, and videos made of the Hicks family. To truly appreciate their art, one must hear, and preferably see, Ray and Stanley Hicks.

The Last Chivaree is, in essence, a popularized contextual study of folk tradition. It is light years beyond Richard Chase's retellings of Jack tales and other popular accounts of the genre. The book shares many traits with *Dorie*:

Woman of the Mountains, Florence Cope Bush's retelling of her mother's oral accounts of growing up in the Smoky Mountains which was reprinted by the University of Tennessee Press. Despite some similar shortcomings, both books present refreshingly honest portraits of growing up poor in the southern mountains which grip even the casual reader. In the hands of a knowledgeable teacher, these books can be used as effective tools for teaching Appalachian culture and history to undergraduates or high school students.

Reference

Bush, Florence Cope. 1992. *Dorie: Woman of the Mountains*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

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Theme in Oral Epic and in Beowulf. Milman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition. By Francelia Mason Clark. (New York: Garland, 1995. Pp. xxxvi + 252, appendix, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-1874-X.)

Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England. Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 17. By Craig R. Davis. (New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. xvii + 237, appendices, bibliography, ISBN 0-8153-2354-9.)

Albert Lord, in *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) argued against the existence of "transitional" texts, texts that could be a product of a single creator who composed both orally and literately at the same moment of his career:

We may in actuality discover what might be called special categories of texts, but it is more than doubtful that they should be labeled "transitional," that is, part way between oral and written (p.129).

Yet *Beowulf* provided Lord with a challenge. Here was an epic that did not conform to the oral-formulaic theory quite so neatly as did the Homeric and South Slavic epics. Lord kept his definition narrow enough, however, that he could safely argue that *Beowulf*, although unusual, is not a transitional text in the way that he chose to define the term.