

***The Pilgrim Jubilees.* By Alan Young. (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2001. Pp. xi+287, list of Pilgrim Jubilee recordings, notes, index, insert containing black/white photographs, ISBN 1-57806-416-3 pbk.)**

M. Lynn Gillingham

Volume 25, Number 1, 2003

Négocier la transcendance / Negotiating Transcendence

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007136ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/007136ar>

[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

Gillingham, M. L. (2003). Review of [*The Pilgrim Jubilees*. By Alan Young. (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2001. Pp. xi+287, list of Pilgrim Jubilee recordings, notes, index, insert containing black/white photographs, ISBN 1-57806-416-3 pbk.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(1), 271–274.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/007136ar>

with *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* close at hand for reference, as Walker and Child bounce from ballad to ballad which can be difficult to follow at times.

The book does provide access to a wealth of archival material that is not otherwise readily available, and for this the Elphinstone Institute should be commended. Mary Ellen Brown's introduction serves to frame the book very nicely, raising issues discussed in the letters and providing illustrative examples. This introduction is fairly self contained and can stand on its own as a piece that may be of interest to a wider audience. The one shortcoming of the book is its lack of extraneous materials such as photos and indexes, the latter which would be very useful for researchers who are interested in the treatment of particular ballads in this correspondence. Overall, *The Bedesman and the Hodbearer* is not for the initiate, and assumes that one has a high degree of knowledge about Child and is seeking to know more. However, it is an informative text which would be a good addition to any ballad scholar's bookshelf.

Jodi McDavid
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Saint John's

The Pilgrim Jubilees. By Alan Young. (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2001. Pp. xi+287, list of Pilgrim Jubilee recordings, notes, index, insert containing black/white photographs, ISBN 1-57806-416-3 pbk.)

The Pilgrim Jubilees is an African American group that has been performing gospel music in the quartet style since the 1950s. The author of this book, Alan Young, is a journalist from Auckland, New Zealand and this is his second book about African American gospel music. The information gathered for this work is based on audio and videotaped recordings and long-distance calls with members of the group.

Alan Young, at the beginning of this book, says that he wanted "to let the Pilgrim Jubilees tell their story in their own words, as free as possible from editorial interpretation and qualification" (18). He wanted to write about the Pilgrim Jubilees because "Their story is the story of gospel quartet singing" (9).

The Pilgrim Jubilees was the brainchild of Clay and Cleave Graham of Mississippi and although there have been a number of members over the years, Young devotes chapters to pivotal group members: Cleave Graham and Clay Graham, the forces behind the group; Major Roberson, Bobby McDougle, Ben Chandler, Michael Atkins, Eddie Graham and Fred Rice. These chapters describe how the members first met and bonded, and how they feel, in their own words, about the group's contribution to music.

The book is divided into twenty-three short chapters which figure as excerpts in the fifty-three year history of the group. Along the way, the reader gets a lesson in recording history and African American quartet singing. But this book is equally accessible to the novice, the gospel fan or the Pilgrim Jubilee fan. Young's respect and admiration for the group, evident in the overwhelming background detail he provides, are patently obvious. His book presents issues such as the influence of the minstrel tradition on universal quartets, the difficulty that an African American group faced in recording their music, and the general problems of the recording industry. He also discusses the difficulty of walking the narrow line between preaching a holy message through song and entertainment for economic recompense. These issues are a major theme of this book.

Young's explication of the musical side of quartet singing sheds light for the novice as well. He defines quartet music and its various components such as the twin-lead system, antiphonal call-and-response style, the walk-on or spoken introduction, the drive and sermonettes. Such explanatory detail adds a richness to an account which does not simply assume that the reader is an expert in the field. It also illustrates the way in which a formulaic structure is interwoven with creativity in gospel music. The formulas serve as markers of recognition for the fan and the creativity is what sets each gospel group apart.

The best chapter in this book is the second-last and this is where the ethnography of the group comes together. Young asks the group members, "What does being a gospel singer — or musician — mean to you?" (221). He elicits some of the most enlightening and revealing aspects of the entire book. The men talk about working and singing for God and their desire to "lead [people] to Christ" (216). They also talk about the temptations they have faced and the obstacles they have overcome. Cleave remarks, "I'm not perfect but the one I sing about

is" (214). Young's response to this remark is particularly insightful and reflects the words of the group member's themselves: this is Cleave's "abiding Christian faith, his desire to spread a message in song about that faith, and his recognition of human frailty, including his own" (214). According to the members themselves, it was just this faith and the desire to share it that kept them going through hardship and adversity. The faith, and the adversity, are felt in the singing.

The final section of Young's book is entitled "The Pilgrim Jubilees on Record" and it lists the locations, names and dates of all the Pilgrim Jubilees' recordings from 1953 to 2000. Not only does it stand as a testimonial to the endurance of this phenomenal group but it is also an invaluable asset for the Pilgrim Jubilees' fan.

One of the strengths of this book is Young's ability to vividly describe the setting of the events in which the group performs. His attention to detail, emotion, anticipation, and expectation evokes a sense of real presence for the reader. One of the signs of a good ethnography is the ability to make the subject matter personal for the reader and Young succeeds admirably at this task.

The only problem I had with this book was the structure of some of the chapters. Throughout the book there are instances where Young describes an event or situation in his voice, and then the text switches abruptly to the voice of one of the group members with no transition, just imposing bold, black letters to indicate who is speaking. In the midst of the member's words, Young jumps in with extra commentary or explications in italics, again with no transition. This leaves the text disjointed. Young is influenced here by his desire to let the group members speak in their own voices and that is laudable. However, a little more contextualization of the interviews from the author would have framed these chapters much more effectively. As it stands, some of the chapters seem to be a collection of disjointed memories.

That being said, it does not detract from a very good ethnography of the Pilgrim Jubilees. It succeeds as a colorful history for the Pilgrim Jubilees fan, as an introduction to the gospel and quartet world for the interested novice, and as an ethnography of an African American gospel group struggling to be heard.

Young often touches on the difficulties of maintaining a gospel group in the face of increasing secularization in the music business. The idea

that the religious group who strives to bring a message to their listeners, must also be entertainers and businessmen, is an important theme of this book. Young effectively illustrates this tension not just for the Pilgrim Jubilees but also for the gospel singing industry as a whole.

This book was interesting and full of amazing detail and I wholly recommend it. It is based on meticulous research and the writing style is, for the most part, effective and accessible. I think, however, that Young removed his own presence from the work too thoroughly. This book is about more than a gospel group named the Pilgrim Jubilees. It is also about one researcher's, and one fan's, journey to pierce their depths and walk away inspired. Young argued that he wanted the group to stand alone and speak to the reader in their own words but I think that Young's own admiration for the group would have added another layer to the ethnography.

M. Lynn Gillingham
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Saint John's

Recentering Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths.

By Roger de V. Renwick. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 183, works cited, general index, singer index, song index, ISBN 1-57806-393-0, cloth.)

For over thirty years, one of the easiest ways to disparage a folkloristic study has been to call it "item-oriented." We have not abandoned text completely, but folklorists do pride themselves on having moved beyond the inherently philological approaches typified by the Historic-Geographic method, with its emphasis on indices and genre-based catalogues, and on type analyses rooted in the genealogy of tales or songs. For these approaches, "the text is [or was] the thing." All this, of course, is basic stuff for anyone with an Intro to Folklore course under their belt. So it comes as a surprise to find that a new major study of Anglo-American folksong — perhaps the first of the new millennium — reasserts the relevance, in fact necessity, of philological research in folklore.