

## Ethnologies

**Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat. *Dead Horse on the Tulameen: Settlers Verse From BC's Similkameen Valley*. (Princeton: 2011, Canadian Folk Workshop. Pp. 293. ISBN: 978-0-9877255-0-9)**

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in individual, situational and generational dimensions along with the changes of social and cultural backgrounds.

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Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat. *Dead Horse on the Tulameen: Settlers Verse From BC's Similkameen Valley*. (Princeton: 2011, Canadian Folk Workshop. Pp. 293. ISBN: 978-0-9877255-0-9)

Bartlett and Ruebsaat present a fairly straightforward project familiar to several studies both popular and scholarly: using a popular local tradition to describe and, at times, interpret the public history and geographic context of a place. In this study, the authors use the popular verse tradition to explore the British Columbian rural communities in the Similkameen Valley. From 1890 to 1960, seven communities emerged in this historically isolated southern valley that is now reached by the Crow's Nest Highway and centred around the small city of Princeton.

The work attempts to straddle the popular-academic divide and generally manages to do so, but only after a disastrous preface and the first half of an introductory chapter. The authors initially fail to properly delineate their topic, while also offering a clumsy interpretation of folk culture which manages to perpetuate history as technological determinism, as well as the archaic disappearing folklore model. Neither of these sections are necessary. The authors are accomplished folksong collectors and interpreters, and even a cursory search of the literature would have revealed the work of Pauline Greenhill on folk poetry. In ways the authors of *Dead Horse* don't, Greenhill (1989) in *True Poetry* efficiently explains the interrelationship between folksong, local song, and local poetry. Failure by Bartlett and Ruebsaat to establish a clear link between the genres, as well as their relevance in revealing the public culture of the community, is initially confusing and limits the readers' trust in the competency of the

authors. Likewise, the rather moribund view of folk and popular culture suggests the work may be less useful to a scholarly audience. Fortunately, after these initial missteps, the work finds its feet.

The first indication of the study coming together is the subtle and nuanced discussion of using local newspapers as source material. Bartlett and Ruebsaat rely heavily on the archived *Princeton Star*, which they argue expresses the “public history” of colonial British culture of the valley. Using census records along with a general catalogue of the paper’s content, they argue that, because of their non-British cultural heritage and everyday practices, the lived experience of over half the town is excluded from the record. Throughout the work, the authors treat source material carefully and, especially around labour issues, demonstrate the biases represented in the editorial policy of racist colonialism’s promotion of a normative British template of citizenry.

What is preserved in the newspapers, however incomplete as a total record, is an excellent example of the way folk poetry is a celebration of the local, concrete, and personal. *Father Pat* (37-38), is a good example of a memorial verse that embeds local cultural priorities with stanzas like:

He never peeked at keyholes  
Nor fought the cigarette;  
He never frowned on lager beer  
Nor games of chance—and yet...

The seventeen chapters are arranged around a significant time period or theme. Each chapter has a brief (4-6 page) introduction. The writing is efficient, making specific use of the verse (which is reproduced in full following the introduction) to weave an accessible context for the poems. The work on the role of newspapers and the discourse of Boosterism in the pioneer period of the West is very well done. Unlike the initial section of *Dead Horse*, the authors provide a good critical reading of the changing discourses and regional identity construction tactics of rural communities throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Chapter 3 (58). Other chapters on sport and prohibition also show a familiarity with the larger scholarship on the topic and issues like class, colonialism, and racism are handled with a light and accessible hand, while displaying to the reader specific verse examples where the “larger than local” is concretized in common verse.

Several sections or entire chapters, like the exemplary Chapter 17, are about tracing and illuminating antecedents, variations, transmission, and parodies. Here the authors’ extensive folk and popular song knowledge

serves them well and folksong scholars will appreciate the work and craft of these sections. Chapter 17 is a narrative tracing the hunt for the full story behind the titular verse. Common during the butterfly collecting period of folklore/song scholarship, the joy of the narrative is not lessened for having been told before: a scrap of verse obscure in origins or purpose is found to be but a piece of a much larger poem, which is then found to be a suite of verse on an event of obscure local origins that, nevertheless, under careful examination, exposes much of the popular identity and everyday life of the community. Scholars as diverse as Archie Green, George Korson, and Herbert Halpert have told similar tales and we forget in our contemporary theory laden scholarship how satisfying and illuminating a straightforward narrative of putting the pieces together can be.

Throughout, the book is peppered with well chosen photographs and advertisements from the local archives and newspapers the authors used. The effect is to deepen our engagement with the time period under study. Unlike several books of this type the reproductions are high resolution and cleanly printed on good quality paper. Three good indexes and a bibliography round out the work.

The audience for the work is unclear since it is largely a crossover study that does a good job of accessibly contextualizing a genre. The study itself does not add much to the scholarship except perhaps to illustrate the continued value of using folk materials to critically represent the popular history of a region, time period, and people. Those interested in popular verse, and even those working in Canadian popular song traditions, would do well to have it on their shelf since it preserves a good sample of previously inaccessible material. British Columbia local history scholars will also find some value in the work.

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### Reference

Greenhill, Pauline. 1989. *True Poetry: Traditional and Popular Verse in Ontario*. Kingston: McGill-Queens UP.