

Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice. By James Porter and Herschel Gower. (Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. Pp. xlvii + 357, song texts with musical transcriptions, genealogy, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index, \$48 U.S., ISBN 0-87049-904-1 cloth.)

James Moreira

Volume 21, Number 1, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087775ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087775ar>

[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

Moreira, J. (1999). Review of [*Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice.* By James Porter and Herschel Gower. (Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. Pp. xlvii + 357, song texts with musical transcriptions, genealogy, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index, \$48 U.S., ISBN 0-87049-904-1 cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 21(1), 267–271.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087775ar>

Klassen's work makes a valuable contribution to the genre of religious biography. It is marred, however, by theoretical and methodological ambitions which cannot be realized on account of insufficient empirical evidence.

David Scheffel

University College of the Cariboo
Kamloops, British Columbia

Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice. By James Porter and Herschel Gower. (Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. Pp. xlvii + 357, song texts with musical transcriptions, genealogy, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index, \$48 U.S., ISBN 0-87049-904-1 cloth.)

Jeannie Robertson ranks among the best known ballad singers of all time. This statement, which I think few would challenge, points not just to the achievements of an individual but also to certain ironies of balladry in mass media culture. During the present century, some singers of this putatively oral, "folk" genre have gone from local favourites to international recording stars, albeit stars with a limited audience. Robertson was a "traveller," a member of a class of itinerant peddlers found in many parts of Britain and well noted as active preservers of traditional beliefs and arts. She grew up steeped in those traditions, and even as a young girl she was regarded an unusually gifted singer by her family and their circle. Later in life, however, she was subject to national and international attention after being "discovered" — a word used often in the present study, always in quotations and so never comfortably — by Hamish Henderson, a founder of the School of Scottish Studies and a seminal force in the post-War folk revival in Scotland. Her revival career, which extended from the 1950s until illness forced her to retire in the mid-1960s, placed her in front of many different kinds of audiences, from the intimate and (somewhat) familiar folk clubs in her native Northeast Scotland to the large anonymous concert stages of England and appearances on BBC television. Moreover, held forward by her promoters as the epitome of the traditional singer, she was sought out by young revival acolytes who wished to study her style and technique (Ray Fisher is perhaps the one best known to North American audiences). Members of her family, notably her daughter Lizzie Higgins and at least two nephews, also became important figures in the Scottish folk revival.

Though Robertson died in 1975, her influence continues to be felt both regionally and internationally — a legacy not enjoyed or enjoyed more narrowly by American counterparts such as Almeda Riddle, Sara Cleveland, or Marie Hare.

But like these other women, Robertson emerged from the comfort of an intimate song circle to the relative detachment of the mass-mediated revival. The vagaries of this transition and its effect on Robertson's style and repertoire constitute the main focus of the present study. It is a multi-layered and at times difficult work, but it makes a substantial contribution to the literature on individual singers and is sure to become an essential work in its field. Overall, there is little that could be asked of a biography of a traditional singer that this work does not provide. Though it lacks the exclusive first person of Almeda Riddle's autobiography (Abrahams 1970), it draws extensively on field interviews with Robertson and members of her family recorded over several decades, and so the voice of the subject is preserved. The biographical chapters, though no doubt selectively composed, are comprehensive and detailed. It offers a sizeable — though not complete — collection of the singer's ballads with musical transcriptions. Like William McCarthy's *The Ballad Matrix* (1989), it applies several modes of analysis to its subject. And it stands alone among most other works of its kind by providing musicological analyses of select features of Robertson's repertoire.

The general comprehensiveness of the work is no accident. The culmination of decades of research, its roots lie at the beginning of the post-war British folk revival in the mid 1950s and it carries forward to the generations that continue to sing Robertson's songs long after her death. Theoretically, it embraces post-structural analysis and recent modes of ethnographic enquiry, while still showing in places — especially in the song annotations — a certain fidelity to Freudian and (to a lesser extent) Marxist approaches that would have been in vogue at its outset. In addition, the voices of the two authors remain remarkably independent in the text. Whether this comes across as conflict or counterpoint is for each reader to decide; I found myself inclined in both directions at different points.

The study breaks down into four parts: introduction, biography, texts and musical transcriptions (with annotations), and finally, a series of analytical sketches of the repertoire, its texts, music, and the influence of contextual variation. The introduction packs an amazing amount of material into a very tight space, providing background information on the singer, traveller culture

and its singing traditions, and a number of theoretical issues central to subsequent analyses. Because of their brevity, these segments tend to assume a great deal of advance knowledge and may be heavy going for readers with a limited knowledge of folkloristic theory, which is a concern given that the work's subject is bound to appeal to a more general, revival audience. The same criticism holds for the more detailed analyses at the end of the study; they are highly technical and not always lucid in their handling of theoretical issues. In the work's defence, however, I should add that the density results from the authors' attempt to bring numerous analytical perspectives to bear within a confined space. There is a lot here for those with the expertise or the patience to mine it.

In contrast to the more analytical segments, the biographical chapters flow in an easy and engaging narrative. Nine in all, they lay out in detail and with candour the people, places, events, and beliefs that helped shape Jeannie Robertson's life, from her parents to her revival followers and from traveller caravan to an MBE at Buckingham Palace. These chapters, though occasionally guilty of romanticizing both traveller culture and Robertson's own life, offer a balanced treatment on the whole. In fact, given the number of taboo subjects and personal tragedies that are handled, one senses that the biographers' greatest challenge was not to let the narrative deteriorate into a maudlin melodrama. The biography is especially good in its handling of Robertson's beliefs, both her religious beliefs and those inherited from traveller tradition. They are neither denigrated nor mystified, but presented flatly, a fact of traveller life. The main weakness of the section, I felt, was its uncritical assessment, or more to the point lack of assessment, of the folk revival. Perhaps too many difficult things would have to be said about colleagues and others still living, but as it stands, the revival simply grins at us from the pages of the biography, much like the faces in the many po(i)sed photographs of Jeannie and revival notables. One telling shot of a visibly agitated Robertson counting off conditions or complaints on her fingers — captioned "Jeannie Robertson lays it on the line" — receives no support from the text indicating what has been laid on the line or what caused the affront.

The work includes eighty of Robertson's songs. Complete transcriptions of texts and melodies are provided, as is a glossary of Scots (Doric) words and expressions where needed. Neither texts nor melodies are direct transcriptions of single performances, but are, in the authors' term, "crystallized" versions drawn from multiple performances. Textual variations, though there are

surprisingly few of them, are indicated in footnotes, while melodic variations and ornamentation are indicated by smaller note-heads on the staff. The transcriptions, nonetheless, do reflect the songs as performed by Robertson, and the musical transcriptions in particular offer a clear guide to the dynamic range of this singer's style, revealing a command of subtle ornamentation on the one hand and of rhythmic precision on the other, according to her sense of the dictates of the song. The annotations are detailed and comment on a diverse range of textual, thematic, and melodic relationships. The songs themselves are grouped in eight thematic divisions, each designed to highlight a portion of the repertoire in relation to some aspect of Robertson's life or group identity; for example, "Songs of Childhood," "Songs of Freedom" — those related to her traveller identity — and so on. Ironically, although this affiliation of repertoire and biography appears to stem directly from Porter's earlier work on singer "epistemics" (their subjective knowledge) as a guide to repertoire categorization (1986), the link is not made clear in discussion of the songs, although an interpretive application of epistemics is included among the analyses. The authors also note that the "thematic groupings should always be seen in relation to Jeannie's sequencing of individual songs in her concert programs" (p. 105), yet as no samples of set lists are provided, the reader has no way of seeing how this works in practice.

The analytical segments occupy the last forty pages of the work, and within that limited space a considerable amount of ground is covered. As stated above, the variety of theoretical perspectives employed is truly impressive, though a rather severe compression inevitably results from a lack of space. More or more complete examples are wanted at many points. To be blunt, some of the topics addressed could have been culled to allow more room for others: a paragraph on the second last page introducing recent parapsychological theories on precognition to address second-sight, a power which Robertson claimed to possess, contributes little to either the present work or the broader interests of folkloristics. The central concept, the one on which the reputation of this study is likely to rest and which is developed in several of the analyses, is "transformativity." It emphasizes the dynamic exchange that is an inherent part of a singer's relationship with his or her tradition: that which is learned from a collective tradition is ultimately shaped into a personal means of expression; repertoire and style evolve over time in relation to personal relationships, specific events, and to the general course of aging; and new contexts and new audiences introduce alternative opportunities as well as

communicative and aesthetic problems that need to be resolved. In Jeannie Robertson's case, family upheavals, the increasing integration of travellers into mainstream Scots society, her discovery and promotion as a folk revival artist, are shown to be the primary social catalysts, but of equal significance are her awareness of her own talent and her sensitivity to the demands of performance. These too push her in new directions.

More than just a biography and song collection, *Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice* reveals an artist sensitive to her place within tradition and her varying roles as a performer, from community singer to revival star. I not only recommend the book, but suggest it as required reading for anyone interested in folksong and particularly for those interested in the impact of the revival on traditional singers. If the work has weaknesses, most can be traced to the necessity of compressing a vast amount of material into a single volume; at the same time, there are few other works on individual singers that offer such comprehensiveness with respect to biography, repertoire, and analysis.

References

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1970. *A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- McCarthy, William B. 1989. *The Ballad Matrix: Personality, Milieu, and the Oral Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Porter, James. 1986. Ballad Explanations, Ballad Reality, and the Singer's Epistemics. *Western Folklore* 45, 2: 110-125.

James Moreira
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Corner Brook, Newfoundland

The Slavic Epic: Gundulić's Osman. By Zdenko Zlatar. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995. Pp. xxx + 599, acknowledgments, list of illustrations, list of maps, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-8204-2380-7 cloth.)

The Slavic Epic is a lengthy, detailed discussion of the seventeenth-century Croatian poet Ivan (Djivo) Gundulić and his best-known work, the literary epic *Osman*. *Osman*, a poem that Gundulić never completed, is a