

**Thomas D. ISERN, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1990, xiv + 248 pp.)**

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contemporaries, Burke and Wollstonecraft. Handler and Segal argue that positions that appear as absolute truths in political writing occur as alternatives in Austen. They illustrate how Jane Austen introduces a variety of cultural truths instead of presenting the authoritative voice on one homogenous culture. Her use of contradictory voices and perspectives demonstrates that everything is not resolved, in fact there may be contexts in which resolution is not possible. This ethnographic perspective calls into question the objective, supreme view that is so often the voice of anthropological and folkloristic investigation. This reading of Austen as ethnographer reminds us that the fieldworker's/analyst's appropriation of authority is a narrow and often limiting stance that in the past has sometimes contributed to a silencing of the female or ethnic voice.

It is impossible to know now what Austen meant exactly or what the social world of her time was really like. Nevertheless this analysis of Jane Austen's work raises stimulating questions about the value of literature for ethnographers and the importance of the concept of multiple realities for those of us exploring any cultural context. Richard Handler and Daniel Segal not only offer something of value for the literary analyst and the ethnographer but their book also represents an important resource for those of us in folklore who often find ourselves straddling disciplines and drawing on multiple sources.

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Thomas D. ISERN, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1990, xiv + 248 pp.)

Thomas D. Isern's book, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs*, is the definitive study of harvesting and threshing technology on North America's western plains. Filled with enormous detail about the various types of machines that mechanized the labours of the harvest, his account describes the threshing and harvesting of wheat on the Canadian and American Plains from the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century. Isern's book is primarily a descriptive one; as he states at the outset, he intends "to tell what harvesting and threshing were like before the combine" (p. xi). Focusing primarily on the machines themselves, he provides a careful chronology of technological inno-

vations, offering precise explanations of how each labour-saving advance fitted into the existing technological scheme.

The title of Isern's book indicates the two major components of the agricultural process on which his study focuses. A bull thresher refers to a common type of machine; one aspect of the book thus concentrates on the technology involved in the harvesting process. Bindlestiffs refer to the migrant labourers who were hired on from farm to farm; Isern also discusses the work culture surrounding these machines. While the book purports to concentrate equally on these twin themes of machine and labourer, the author often tends to emphasize the intricacies of technology over the details of everyday work culture. Much of the book focuses on the progression of technologies that marked the North American harvest process in the early twentieth century, outlining where particular types of equipment were used, and how they improved existing practices.

Of equal interest to the folklorist are those portions of the book that discuss the human element surrounding the harvest on the plains. Isern provides an interesting account of the seasonal labourers required to actually run these machines. Groups of men were either hired by a particular thresherman or worked in a specific area in a threshing ring to provide the manpower necessary to complete the harvest. These labourers are reminiscent of other seasonal workers across the country: those employed in the harvesting of other crops, or in the cutting of lumber or the catching of fish. The enormous scale of this work force on the plains immediately makes the reader wonder about the forms and extent of expressive culture common among these bindlestiffs, a topic obviously not within the scope of Isern's study. Needless to say, much of the oral folklore related to work on the Canadian plains still needs to be researched.

Isern does briefly mention several aspects of work culture that suggest directions for future research. In a number of instances throughout his book, the vocabulary of the work process as well as the technical terms of material culture are provided. Several brief sections mention the daily support needed for labourers during their harvesting work on each farm. How the crews were fed is briefly touched upon, but the reader would like more detail on the day-to-day living arrangements needed for these workers as they moved from farm to farm. The question of what workers did quite apart from running their machines still needs to be answered.

With much of the book having the machine as point of departure for discussion, how the work actually took place sometimes is only summarized. The structure and dynamics of the work crew is rarely discussed, as is the relation of the work crew to the individual farmer. While broad trends are often sketched as to what region was receptive to particular technologies, the reader gets little feeling for the individuals involved in these complex choices, or for how these choices were actually made.

Isern's study appeared shortly after Sanford Rikoon's book, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988). Both books, as Isern points out, indicate that threshing was one of the more attractive elements in the farm life of central North America. However, Isern's study sheds a different light on threshing culture. While Rikoon argues that threshing technology frequently led to an irreconcilable tension with regard to change by farmers who were believed to be basically conservative, Isern argues quite the opposite. Instead, he claims that farmers were comfortable with technological change, and often adapted inventions in new ways to facilitate harvesting practices. Rather than fostering the image of farmers as basically a conservative group in terms of new inventions, Isern points out that innovative technologies, when proved effective, were quickly incorporated into local practices. Rural farmers, then, were no different from what has often been perceived as their more cosmopolitan urban cousins.

*Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs* is an important study, dealing in part with the growing concern with how mass-production and machinery influenced rural cultures in North America. No longer can it be simplistically assumed that the machine (or similar villains of more recent years such as mass media) led to the destruction of traditional culture. Rather, such innovations were readily incorporated into existing value schemes, and quickly added to the accepted patterns of everyday life. Thomas Isern's book indicates how much still needs to be known about what historically were the most common occupations in North America: those that took place on the farm. That machines played such a central role is no surprise. Understanding that role will move us beyond the romantic suspicion of new technologies that has characterized so much of our past research.

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Allen W. BATTEAU, *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson, University Press of Arizona, 1990. Pp. viii, 239, \$29.95 (clothbound), ISBN 0-8165-1172-1)

In 1953 at the age of fourteen I ran away from home with my friend Walter. We took a bus from the old Greyhound terminal on 34th Street to somewhere in Pennsylvania, slept out in a field, and the next day hitchhiked as far as