

Richard Mercer Dorson (1916-1981)

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Obituary/Notice nécrologique

RICHARD MERCER DORSON
(1916–1981)

When Richard Dorson died on September 11, 1981 in Bloomington, Indiana, Canadian folklorists lost not only an internationally prominent colleague, but also a significant force in their discipline nationally. Dorson was so thoroughly trained and active in — one might almost say identified with — American studies that his contribution to Canadian scholarship is not immediately evident. Yet, it was and continues to be, profound.

At the time of his death Dorson was Distinguished Professor of Folklore and History and Director of the folklore graduate programme at Indiana University. He began his academic career at Harvard where he obtained his B.A. and M.A. in American History as well as a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization (1943).

A key figure in the development of academic folklore studies in the U.S.A., Dorson was instrumental in the establishment (1963) of Indiana University's Folklore Institute, which he directed for many years. Concurrent with these academic concerns, Dorson responded to the demands of the public as well as academics in other disciplines for accessible works dealing with folklore. Consequently, while Dorson could never be termed a popularizer as such, he did battle that anathema, fakelore, by producing academically sound works for general reading. A number of his twenty-four books (most notably *American Folklore* (1957) and *America in Legend* (1974)), as well as some of his over 200 articles were aimed at an audience beyond folklorists. Overall he sought to promote the understanding and study of folklore whenever and however he could and, in this respect, was unequalled in his time. His Canadian influence derives from these efforts, combined with his dedication to graduate teaching and to international comparative studies.

The majority of trained English-speaking folklorists presently working in Canada studied with Dorson at Indiana or with his students at other institutions. Dorson was a teacher to leave an imprint so that his influence continues, transmitted today to students who will never know him except

through his writings. Canadian academics outside folklore often identify the field with him. His work is, as a result, more widely known in some Canadian universities than is much Canadian folklore scholarship. This situation owes in part to his training and continued activity as an historian, for historians have long had a particular influence and significance in Canadian academe. The very nature of his work — especially his efforts to interrelate folklore, culture, and history — have, however, made it especially relevant to and therefore particularly valued by Canadians who typically have demanded pragmatism with respect to folklore. The public prominence of Dorson's writings has resulted in his having a presence as a folklorist for many average Canadians equalled only by Marius Barbeau's.

His only foray into Canadian material was indirect — his collecting among Canadiens in the Michigan Upper Peninsula. This experience no doubt bolstered his unflagging support for French-Canadian folklore work, especially the efforts of Luc Lacourcière and Les Archives de Folklore, which ultimately led to the establishment of CÉLAT. Through his international activities and works such as *Folklore Research Around the World* (1961), Dorson significantly helped draw to the French-Canadian scholarship the world-wide recognition and prominence it today enjoys.

A rather controversial man and one to inspire strong feeling, Richard Dorson was a powerful figure — intellectually and physically vigorous and thoroughly a scholar. One might disagree with him, but one could never ignore him. For some time, opposition to Dorson has been almost programmatic among younger folklorists, for he personally represented the Establishment of the discipline, the past to be overreached. I particularly respected Dorson for accepting, almost welcoming such challenges to his approaches and analyses for what they were — evidence of the intellectual vitality he devoted his life to creating in our discipline.

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