

Four-Foot Cucumbers, Juvenile Delinquents & Frogs From the Sky!: Snippets of Life in Victorian Canada. By Crystal Fulton and Glen C. Phillips. (London, Ontario: Cheshire Cat Press, 1997, 152 p., ISBN 0-921818-18-1).

Features and Fillers: Texas Journalists on Texas Folklore. Edited by Jim Harris and Assistant Edited by Carolyn Satterwhite. Texas Folklore Society Publication 56. (Denton: U Texas P, 1999, viii & 233p., ISBN 1-57441-074-1).

Philip Hiscock

Espace

Space

Volume 24, numéro 1, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006542ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/006542ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hiscock, P. (2002). Compte rendu de [*Four-Foot Cucumbers, Juvenile Delinquents & Frogs From the Sky!: Snippets of Life in Victorian Canada.* By Crystal Fulton and Glen C. Phillips. (London, Ontario: Cheshire Cat Press, 1997, 152 p., ISBN 0-921818-18-1). / *Features and Fillers: Texas Journalists on Texas Folklore.* Edited by Jim Harris and Assistant Edited by Carolyn Satterwhite. Texas Folklore Society Publication 56. (Denton: U Texas P, 1999, viii & 233p., ISBN 1-57441-074-1).] *Ethnologies*, 24 (1), 294–297.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/006542ar>

Four-Foot Cucumbers, Juvenile Delinquents & Frogs From the Sky!: Snippets of Life in Victorian Canada. By Crystal Fulton and Glen C. Phillips. (London, Ontario: Cheshire Cat Press, 1997, 152 p., ISBN 0-921818-18-1).

Features and Fillers: Texas Journalists on Texas Folklore. Edited by Jim Harris and Assistant Edited by Carolyn Satterwhite. Texas Folklore Society Publication 56. (Denton: U Texas P, 1999, viii & 233p., ISBN 1-57441-074-1).

As every folklorist knows, folklore turns up in newspapers with some frequency. To twist a current proverb's meaning, what goes around comes around — what is in the wind, gets in the press. This fact is no doubt alarming to those who see folklore problematically, as popular misconception in need of correction, and as a barrier to hard news, true news. I imagine some newspaper journalists see their God-given brief to write the truth and avoid folklore. Others don't. And besides, not all folklore falls easily into one of fact or fancy.

Several recently published books draw folkloric texts from journalistic sources. One, from Canadian newspapers, was published in 1997: Crystal Fulton and Glen C. Phillips's *Four-Foot Cucumbers, Juvenile Delinquents & Frogs From the Sky!: Snippets of Life in Victorian Canada* contains about 140 pages of excerpts (about 600 items) from nineteenth century newspapers published in ten provinces and the Yukon. Each item is a paragraph, perhaps only a few words, with a full reference enabling the reader to track down the original. They are the by-product of the editors' historical research.

Commercial scams, contemporary legends, tall tales, traditional pranks, customs..., many genres of folklore are represented. It includes local oddities of the sort sometimes called *faits divers*: "The other day a curiosity was exhibited at Wingham in the shape of a large wasp's nest. The nest was found by James McConnell of Hullett Township and measures 5 feet in circumference..." (30; *Aylmer Express* 19 Dec. 1890 ? I had this nest's brother in my backyard last summer). Some are not so odd: "Two dogs of this town have formed themselves into a society for the destruction of grouse, prairie chickens, and other birds now hatching. They should be tied up" (31; *Vernon News* 18 June 1893). Indeed. I hope they were. There is a barrel of caviar from one sturgeon (28); a dog with a tin pan tied to his tail by naughty boys (110); and a complaint about other boys for their swearing and spitting at a post office (111).

Among the tall tales are some reminiscent of mosquito stories found in Michael Taft's *Tall Tales of British Columbia* (*Sound Heritage* 39, 1983) and Herbert Halpert's "Mosquitoes on the Runway" (*Western Folklore* 49 [1990]: 145-161). This one is from the *Missisquoi News*, 5 June 1885:

There are some large insects in Farnham woods, if all the stories are true. A man who went to peel bark, taking his dinner with him, reports that while he was away from his work in search of water, a huge mosquito ate his dinner and used his bark spud for a toothpick (29).

Another mosquito story is on p. 34. The "bosom serpent" legend (bugs in water) appears (49), as do a hot weather tall tale (45-46), a duck hunting one (46), a bird and a fish on one hook (73), a corpse preserved in liquor and the liquor is drunk (93-94) — "drinking the admiral" it's known as elsewhere —, bees attacking a florid hat thus stinging the wearer (28), and a rainstorm of frogs (42). My list of obvious folkloric texts runs to just over thirty items but there are a couple of dozen other relevant items. *Cucumbers* is a good source of folklore in newspapers; it would probably make a good supplementary textbook for a course inclined towards the interactions of folklore and popular media. It also makes good reading.

The other book at hand has more attention to folklore as a discipline and less merely random collection. It is *Features and Fillers: Texas Journalists on Texas Folklore*, produced by Jim Harris and Carolyn Satterwhite for the Texas Folklore Society. Somewhat larger than *Cucumbers* (about 230 pages), it has far fewer items (36), each item ranging from a couple to about a dozen pages.

In fact, what *Features* features is a series of excellent articles about living folklore by people who are not folklorists, but journalists. Harris himself wrote a regional history column in his Texan hometown newspaper; it drew heavily on oral history and folklore in his local area. He soon learned that even in a tiny local area, there were plenty of stories for him to write about; as soon as he published one story, people would contact him with their stories. And the chain would continue.

As someone who has done his share of writing about folklore topics for the popular press, I know exactly what this is like. My short magazine pieces (in, for instance, *The Downhomer*, a Newfoundland monthly) often lead to contacts by phone, letter, email and face-to-face, contacts to people's stories that could give me enough work to research for the

rest of my life. The feedback loop of folklore in the press is a highly energetic loop, a kind of perpetual motion machine. (Did I mention the perpetual motion machine in *Cucumbers?* — it's on p. 132 and was invented by an Oneida named James Doxtator, according to the *Hagersfield Indian*, 17 March 1886.)

There is a long history of popularisers of folklore and journalists interested in folklore. To mention a few here in Canada, there were the Barrelman (Joe Smallwood before he was a successful politician), Art Rockwood (another Newfoundlander who successfully melded radio and folklore), and Clary Croft, who has helped make Helen Creighton's work more widely known, especially in her own province of Nova Scotia.

Such authors do more than reflect culture back at the folk; it's not a simple feedback mechanism. They shape the tradition and help build regional folklores. Harris points this out in his Introduction: "for as long as there has been a Texas" Texan newspapers have fed their readers information about themselves. That information can be the unself-conscious matter of current rumour, now often quickly identified by sharp-eyed readers as "urban legend". And it can be the highly inflected and marked matter of traditional legend, that which passes as True Folklore of the region, whichever region.

Though mainly from the 1980s and 1990s, Harris's newspaper stories go back as far as the late 1960s. La Llorona is here, the disappearance of the rural hedgerow, memories of early radio, information on folk medicine, death customs... Such things are pleasant reminiscences. But the book also has some less pleasant thoughts: the grittier side of keeping aggressive roosters; disease and epidemic; guarding a house against the Ku Klux Klan in the mid-1950s; memories of a hanging. There are sections on calendar dates, weather lore, and the role of animals in language. There are a woodworker, a bricklayer (or rather an adobero), musicians, a storyteller, healers, cow-chip tea enthusiasts, the evil eye, old landmarks, and even a short biography of Mason Brewer, the Texan black folklorist who died in 1975. And rattlesnake shows, Dust-bowl emigrants, and newspaper poetry — collect "Twas the Night Before" parodies, anyone? Oh yeah: chicken-fried steak, done the right way.

Harris's sixteen-page introduction could serve for university students as an introduction to the range of folklore that one finds in a current newspaper: poems, memorials, "Lordy Lordy, Look Who's Forty"-type

notices, patriotic displays of one sort and another, and so on. The book itself is a warmhearted example of the range of regional folklore anywhere. Nonetheless, I would not recommend *Features* as a primary textbook except perhaps within the American Southwest. It is not an especially scholarly book: it has an index (a good one), but it has no bibliography, although this is only a minor problem. And the introduction has quotes and references that don't actually tell the reader the source.

Regardless, it is an excellent book for anyone interested in the idea of regional folklore and especially so for those who happen to dabble in that sort of journalism. Perhaps we all do from time to time. It is filled with good, descriptive folklore, removed only from the abstracted world of our variable theories, made concrete through the thoughts and pens of writers whose job can simply be to describe well. These are fresh looks at Texan folklore, of the sort we rarely have the chance to take on our trips through scholarly journals.

Philip Hiscock
Memorial University
St. John's, Newfoundland

Men at Play: A Working Understanding of Professional Hockey. By Michael A. Robidoux. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, 222.p. ISBN 0-7735-2169-0 cloth; ISBN 0-7735-2220-4 pbk).

As a folklorist working in a kinesiology department, Michael Robidoux is a rarity who represents the truly interdisciplinary nature of folkloristics. *Men at Play*, based on his dissertation research at Memorial University of Newfoundland, is an ethnography of professional hockey that gives a serious attempt at understanding professional sport through the vision of its players — a folkloric approach to questions more typically reserved for sociologists and cultural theorists. As a former hockey player himself, Robidoux was able to follow a team of the American Hockey League (AHL) for one year and document and analyze the lives of its players. By focusing on these players and their interpretations, he debunks many of the myths of professional sport that are commonly presented in popular media and academic discourse.