

Industrial Folklore A Critical Introduction

Alan O'Connor

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Industrial Folklore: A Critical Introduction

Alan O'Connor

Betty Messenger, *Picking Up the Linen Threads: A Study in Industrial Folklore* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 1978).

Robert H. Byington, ed., *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*. Special Issue of *Western Folklore*, 37 (1978), reprinted as Smithsonian Folklife Studies Number 3 (Washington, D.C. 1978).

Richard M. Dorson, *Land of the Millrats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1981).

It is almost as if, in remoulding the popular heritage, the great writers and musicians of the progressive bourgeoisie had robbed the populace proper of its language.

— Bertolt Brecht

I.

THE FIRST WORDS OF THE INTRODUCTION TO *Picking Up the Linen Threads* should make us pause: "Fifty years ago, . . ." begins Messenger's story of industrial folklore. This then reflects back on the title: picking up the threads. Historians may have already arched an eyebrow at this, but it is important to distinguish between the separate intellectual formations of industrial folklore and social historical studies. Perhaps one of the least obtrusive things that has happened since 50 years ago is the birth of industrial folklore studies as an organized, professional community. There have been other books that one

could cast as "industrial folklore" studies, but Messenger's is the first full scale piece of field research to be published from within this new professional nexus. In 1979 it won first prize in the Chicago Folklore Prize Competition.

What we have then is an extension of the methods and investigative techniques of the discipline of folklore to a new subject area. Instead of peasants or ethnic groups, the inquiry turns to a new group:

I reserve the term *industrial folklore* for those traditions — the conventional genres of the folklorist plus personal narratives — directly associated, in both a formative and performative way, with an economic enterprise that is characterized by large-scale production of goods, extensive mechanization of the production system, and, often, large factory organization (4)

This excludes most folklore of traditional occupations: that of cowboys, sailors, farmers, lumberjacks, and the like. Also excluded are studies of working-class communities. These exclusions are made for pragmatic reasons and their effect is to define a research strategy: industrial folklore is situated in terms of the labour process. There may be a hidden assumption here, of the decline of working-class residential communities in North America, but it must be emphasized that this is a research strategy and one which does not in practice ignore the world beyond the factory gates. Detailed studies of the workplace experience are needed and industrial folklore studies aim specifically to fill this gap.

Picking Up the Linen Threads is in many ways an innovative book, but unlike much recent work in folklore, it uses collected material to reconstruct a past way of life, 50 years ago. There is a useful chapter devoted to the history of the linen industry in Northern Ireland, and to the main technological processes involved in transforming flax into cloth in the early twentieth century. Messenger then selects three areas of the process: spinning, hackling, and weaving; and devotes to each a chapter on their oral history, songs, and

other traditions. A Catholic woman, born in 1898, who worked as a spinner in a country mill told Messenger: "We were happy. You stood all day at your work and sung them songs. You'd a heard you with the frames on, singin' them. We had no pay hardly, but we were happy." (27) The main thread of Messenger's book is to hold this recorded experience against more "pessimistic" historical surveys of conditions in the linen industry. Neville Kirk, however, has pointed out that this juxtaposes two quite different historical periods. "It is, for example, highly doubtful whether the arguments ('pessimistic' and 'optimistic') pertaining to the effects of the Industrial Revolution in Britain between 1790 and the 1840s can be similarly applied to the linen industry between 1900 and 1935."¹ Most of the workers Messenger interviewed came from families who had been accustomed to the discipline of the mill and factory for several generations. Kirk also points out some serious omissions in Messenger's book, for example, her neglect of the hacklers' reaction to machinery that rendered their skills obsolete by the 1930s. The quasi-historical frame adopted by Messenger is problematic and might lead to the conclusion that industrial folklorists must either become full fledged social historians or develop a different orientation altogether.

Indeed there is much in *Picking Up the Linen Threads* that is specifically of interest to folklorists with an urban bent. Messenger finds the most lively oral traditions among spinning-room workers who were employed in dirty conditions and had the lowest status in the industry.² This kind of finding is not surprising to the discipline of folklore, but is valuable

¹ Neville Kirk, review of Messenger, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 16 (1979), 86.

² Thus providing corroborative evidence of the tenacity of sectional differences described in Joseph L. White, *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers, 1910-1914* (Westport, Ct. 1978).

nonetheless.³ The overall intention of tying the oral material closely to the daily routine of its bearers is handicapped by her historical approach, but has been used in an exciting way by the *Working Americans* project discussed below. Messenger also documents a certain legitimacy that work *per se* enjoyed in the Northern Ireland linen industry from 1900 to 1935. Recent folklore studies confirm that know-how is still respected, but American workers in the 1970s debunk workplace authority in their occupational narratives.

I would accept Kirk's suggestion that Messenger needs to reformulate the meaning and purpose of her research. Kirk makes his point by invoking an historical structure in which the recorded work experience must be fitted. It would be wrong to simply interpret this as another instance of a structure/culture debate in historical studies; Kirk invoking an historical structure and Messenger sketching everyday culture. The use of language transcends such a dichotomy. For example, one needs a sense of local speech to situate the remark by a hackler, who started work in 1927, that: "Everybody was for the mill. There was nothin' else for you in them days." (33) In a similar way we must attend to the *writing* of Messenger's research. I am thinking, for example, of what led her to identify her informants by numbers in the text. The emphasis in her book is on workers as a group and a decision has been taken not to provide character sketches of her 88 respondents. Such a large cast would provide literary problems for any writer, but nonetheless many different strategies are available. The point I would like to emphasize is that the decision to describe workers as a group is an example of the kind of literary strategy involved in any historical writing. For this reason it is misleading to dub Messenger's method as

"cultural" or "phenomenological." Messenger does not give us experience, she gives us *writing*. A thoughtless culture/structure debate misses this point altogether.⁴

Messenger's development of industrial folklore deserves the kind of critical attention that Kirk pays it. What Messenger has captured in her book, however, is a sense of *membership* in work and collective traditions. This moment of belonging is real and highly valued by her informants. That this co-existed with poor pay, difficult conditions, blatant sexism in the distribution of jobs, an overall political colonization, and other oppressive factors mentioned by Kirk, does not invalidate this sense of membership. Indeed, it adds to the tragic necessity to transform such a system and organization of production.⁵

II

THE SHARP CONTRAST between Messenger's quasi-historical orientation and *Working Americans* is evident in reading Archie Green's bibliographic and semantic inquiry into the whole topic of industrial folklore. (213-44) Green describes earlier generations of researchers and writers (in several disciplines), but in doing so makes clear the uniqueness of the approach developed in the 1970s. Early work, including George Korson's investigations of the lore of coalminers, through to Nickerson's "Is there a Folk in the Factory" article, simply extends the category of "the folk" to industrial work-

³ See for example, Hayden White, "The historical text as literary artifact," *Clio*, 3 (1974), 277-303; John O'Neill, "Historian's artifacts: Some production issues in ethno-history." Paper given at Oxford University, 1979; and John O'Neill, "The literary production of natural and social science inquiry: issues and applications in the social organization of science," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 6 (1981), 105-20.

⁵ For the notion of tragedy as working out of social formations that are flawed by fundamental contradictions, see Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London 1979).

⁴ See, Carol Henderson Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their Role in Canadian Culture* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series 1979).

ers.⁶ It generally attempts to identify another "little society" more or less in the Redfield tradition.⁷

In 1976 hundreds of hours of narrative performances by workers in many different occupations were recorded in the Working Americans program of the Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian Institute. This was the climax of a five-year program that had started at the 1972 festival. Four of the five contributors to *Working Americans* were part of that project, which occurred at a time of major theoretical advances in the discipline of folklore. The new emphasis in the discipline is loosely termed a "contextual" approach. By contrast with a method of using recorded texts to reconstruct the culture of a past "folk," the new approach employs a hermeneutic by which present contexts for work, performance, and speech intertwine with their recorded technique. The new approach has not abandoned high standards for the recording and transcription of texts, but it encourages an impressionistic and personal dimension, and the cultivation of literary modes of expression for what the folklorist has come to know of styles of life and speech. Incidentally, in folklore (as opposed to oral history) the electronic recording and not the transcript has always been considered the primary document.

Roger Abrahams, the only contributor to *Working Americans* who was not part of the Smithsonian research team, is well known for his superb contributions to "contextual" folklore, but his essay in the present collection is something of an anomaly. Perhaps the reason that it lacks his usual depth of understanding is that his contribution deals with worker folklore from a sociological distance. The result is

unfortunate, as when discussing groups who identify themselves by the work they do, he writes: "An extension of the hypothesis concerning the social base of lore, then, would be that the amount of folklore produced will be directly proportional to how exceptional are the activities carried on in common." (169) As sociology this is much too formal and does not pay enough attention to the actual conditions and patterns of work, which may encourage or inhibit interaction. Abrahams then discusses service occupations such as medicine and waitressing as "talking professions," but his overall theme that occupational "performances" belong outside stable communities (such as the family), misses the fine detail of their foundation in the technique of work groups.

Robert McCarl, who contributes the keynote essay in *Working Americans*, is potentially the most creative practitioner of modern folklore studies.⁸ He calls for a reflexive and democratic practice of research, which understands that the work of ethnographic research should claim no exempt or special status. McCarl worked as a firefighter before turning to the academy and the anthropological models which he found available there have had an unfortunate effect on his early articles.⁹ The philosophical traditions of Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Bourdieu with their descriptions of embodied actions in local settings would have been a better starting point. His present essay, "Occupational Folklife: A Theoretical Hypothesis," is one of his best pieces and

⁶ We look forward to the publication of his, "Occupational Folklife: An Examination of the Expressive Aspects of the Work Culture with Particular Reference to Firefighters," Ph.D. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980.

⁷ See his, "The Production Welder: Product, Process and Industrial Craftsman," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 30 (1974), 243-53; and "Smokejumper Initiation: Ritualized Communication in a Modern Occupation," *Journal of American Folklore*, 89 (1976), 49-66.

⁸ For full references to work in this tradition see Green's article. Nickerson's article is in *Journal of American Folklore*, 87 (1974), 133-9.

⁹ In fact, Nickerson uses the model of Everett M. Rogers, *Modernization Among Peasants* (New York 1969).

could in fact be easily situated in the philosophical traditions just mentioned.¹⁰

McCarl's innovation is to understand work technique or "know-how" as the *shaping principle* of an occupation.¹¹ Although this technique is both done and communicated, we are invited to reflect on Isadora Duncan's comment on dance, "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it." Oral expression is understood to provide a charter for work technique, although some expressive modes can then become performances, as in the case of stories told and acted in a bar after work. Expressive gestures and narratives can usefully be encountered by the folklorist in these extra-work settings, but must be understood to interrupt and pace the work flow to which they belong. For example, accident stories are unintelligible except by reference to the overall "flow" or purpose of the work process and what employees accept as skilled and safe work techniques. Because what actually goes on in the factory or shop may be very different from what management imagines to go on, this type of research demands an inordinate amount of trust. McCarl ends by wondering how our research work could ever deserve that trust.

This is an issue to which we will return, but we should first outline the contributions of McCarl's collaborators. Robert Byington accepts the definition of occupational folklife as consisting of "technique, gesture, narrative and custom, with technique the nucleus from which the other forms derive, and would further emphasize the necessary informality of the network of these expressive behaviors." (185) He provides a helpful

discussion of strategies for gaining access to this folklife. Clearly one must deal with institutions such as companies, owners' associations, and trade unions. He advises that in a unionized shop the researcher *must* be sponsored by the union. An approach through management leads to distrust and even physical danger. (End of ideology theorists please note.) A researcher who cannot gain access to this *in situ* working knowledge could usefully study occupational narratives for which the work context is not indispensable.

Jack Santino's "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives" provides a practical introduction to the field. Cautionary tales about accidents or mishaps provide insights into work practices and, incidentally, take the same form as more traditional oral narratives. The most common theme is that of hostility towards authority. The physical demands of the job and themes of status and authority find expression in stories of pranks, characters, and heroes, first day on the job, and the "good old days." Many of Santino's examples are stories of train workers:

Railroad narrative arises out of and deals with each of the relationships and interactions that are part of the occupation. Engineers portray themselves as being in a highly individualistic, devil-may-care position vis-à-vis the company and the world; while trainmen portray themselves as coping with problematic situations that arise during the daily execution of their work. (211)

This overall emphasis on narratives in the context of the work situation, is different from Messenger's research, which of necessity was constrained to accounts of "the old days" of an industry as it existed in the past.

Clearly the research method (itself a work technique) functions to some degree to shape the topic. This returns us to general issues raised earlier. One very interesting place where the culture/structure debate in historical and cultural studies takes place is over the issue of mass culture. Raymond Williams has

¹⁰ Another excellent recent study is his, "The Communication of Work Technique," *Culture & Tradition*, 3 (1978), 108-16.

¹¹ Ken C. Kusterer's dissertation, which is cited throughout the *Working Americans* collection has since been published as *Know-How on the Job: The Important Working Knowledge of "Unskilled" Workers* (Boulder 1978).

tended to argue that there are no "masses" — only ways of falsely seeing people in this way, from a distance. Against this argument for attention to everyday experience, Terry Eagleton argues that the emergence of "masses" in urban settings is a necessary structural prerequisite to the political action of a whole class. It has been noted that Williams has now accepted some of the force of Eagleton's point, while still retaining the emphasis on experience in his interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony.¹²

The issue arises in industrial folklore as a matter of research technique. Should we approach occupational narratives as personal narratives (this has, of course, a deeply social dimension), or primarily as the expression of a group? Most nineteenth-century folklore research simply assumed that lore belonged to a folk or "primitive mind." There is now a respectable tradition of studies that reverses this assumption in order to concentrate, most usually, on very good "star" performers. At the clubs and bars where Santino recorded his occupational narratives, he argues, attention to individual speakers is simply not relevant: "Usually, the spotlight is traded from raconteur to raconteur, each story triggering a memory and a corresponding story from someone else." (202) A different research tactic by McCarl among airborne forest fire fighters yielded quite the opposite: a long and fairly elaborate story told only on special occasions by one fire fighter, in his own personal style.¹³

This divergence of approaches is related to the ethical issues raised by all of the *Working Americans* contributors: the purpose and force of their own research work. Their investigations are founded upon political and ethical strategies as

much as on a method of research and a literary form. In the research process, ethnographers and folklorists face the responsibility, shared with preachers, politicians, journalists, and other professional shapers of speech and words, of affecting people's lives and understandings. This involves a political relationship between a disciplinary-specific body of writing and everyday traditions of "know-how" and commonsense.

There is a deep realization of this in similar work being done in other disciplines. Like the *Working Americans* research, the work of Paul Willis on shopfloor culture in England belongs to a whole institution of research and study. Take, for example, his essay in *Working Class Culture*, which is influenced by Richard Johnson's interpretation of Gramsci's notion of hegemony.¹⁴ This complex notion in fact requires three constituent terms:

"Common-sense" which refers, concretely, to the lived culture of a particular class or social group; "philosophy" (or sometimes "ideology") which refers to an organized set of conceptions with a more or less transformative relation to lived culture; and "hegemony" which describes the state of play, as it were, between the whole complex of "educative" institutions and ideologies on the one hand, and lived culture on the other. . . .¹⁵

What must be recognized, then, is that Paul Willis' cultural studies or the Smithsonian group's industrial folklife inquiries are *themselves* in a more or less

¹² The debate is outlined in Lesley Johnson, *The cultural critics: From Matthew Arnold to Raymond Williams* (London 1979), 151-2. William discusses hegemony in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977).

¹³ McCarl, "Smokejumper Initiation."

¹⁴ Paul Willis, "Shop floor culture, masculinity and the wage form," in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working Class Culture: Studies in history and theory* (London 1979), 185-98. See also Alan O'Connor, "Cultural Studies and Common Sense," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 5 (1981), 183-95.

¹⁵ Richard Johnson, "Histories of Culture/Theories of Ideology: Notes on an Impasse," in Michele Barrett et al., eds., *Ideology and Cultural Practice* (London 1979). The corresponding passage in *Working Class Culture* is on p. 233.

transformative relation to lived culture. The proponents of a "value-free" social science may object to this, but the alternatives are either to retreat from the vulnerability of others' lives and conduct studies from this "safe" distance, or to lapse into complete irresponsibility.

III

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, Richard Dorson (1916-1981) was undoubtedly the godfather of the discipline of folklore. He alternatively kept aloof from the doubtful beliefs of the new generation of "contextualists," and quietly assimilated such changes as seemed useful to him. *Land of the Millrats* not only breaks new territory for him in the oral traditions of the metropolis, but also has a certain hermeneutic which may not be the same as the contextualists, but which nonetheless deserves serious attention. *Land of the Millrats*, the last book of a lifetime devoted to folklore studies, is complex.

The deep humanity of Dorson's response is evident and clearly expressed. The drawback of his approach is that it simply opens a new field to a more or less instituted approach: "... before opening the door too wide and calling any kind of narrative a folktale, I would impose some restrictions and ask for evidence of a corpus of oral stories. By corpus, I mean a coherent, connected body of narratives with consistent themes."¹⁶ (108) By this admittedly generous standard, narratives within the steel industry do pass muster, but then the purpose of the new field to which Dorson gives his imprimatur is unclear.

Even so, this is an enormously rich book, for example, in terms of its own practice of investigation, which may indeed be one of the most fruitful ways to approach it. It is instructive to imagine a middle-aged university professor and a small team of graduate students working

¹⁶ Dorson's arguments and concern for a narrow definition of folklore (as opposed to popular culture) are found in his *Folklore and Fake-folklore* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976).

in the most incongruous settings with hand-held video cameras and sophisticated German tape recorders, making what are in effect, low-budget documentaries of city life. (234-5) When, for example, one evening things did not quite work out:

We were about to leave, when a soft-spoken, short black man in his mid-thirties began chatting with us about our equipment. Frank Jenkins was a steelworker, who had produced, directed, and starred in a home movie he shot on a super 8 mm camera. We all went to Frank's tiny apartment and he showed us *The Takeover*, a film running nearly two hours, set entirely in the Gary area. . . . A cog in the mills where, like most of his peers, he despises his work, Frank feeds his ambitions and fantasies through his movie career. . . . Frank fashioned his film, much as the märchen-teller of old wove magical fictions from the story elements at his disposal. And, as is often the way with storytellers, Frank has made himself the hero of his tale. (234-5)

It should strike us as curious that folklore, which was until almost ten years ago one of the most past-oriented of disciplines (along with archeology and history), is apparently quite at home with a sophisticated electronic technology. A discipline once dominated by gentlemen scholars¹⁷ could now even develop into a form of cultural materialism which demonstrates alternative uses for the technology of the mass culture industry.¹⁸ But even this democratization of access to modes of public expression cannot in the end evade questions about the purpose and direction of its research in relation to the lifeworlds being so investigated.

The book is based on 117 tape-recorded interviews carried out in 1975 and 1976 in the Calumet region of North-

¹⁷ As argued in Dorson's *The British Folklorists* (London 1968).

¹⁸ See articles by members of Dorson's research team: Thomas Adler, "Hardware and Software in the Urban Field," *Indiana Folklore*, 10 (1977), 113-26; Richard March, "How I became 'The TV Man': Video Fieldwork in the Calumet Region," *Folklore Forum*, 11 (1978), 254-64.

ern Indiana. Unlike Messenger, Dorson is able to place the material he collects in its present-day setting: primarily in its region of Calumet, east of Chicago, with pronounced ethnic and Black populations and dominated by six great steelmills on the Lake Michigan waterfront. The chapter on the industrial folklore of the steel industry is the longest and gives the book its title. But the metropolitan region, with its class, ethnic, and Black cultures (and its criminal life), is more than a frame for the industrial lore. All of these gain their own vernacular in Dorson's book. There is here no one "place" that is the region: for everyone there is a different walk through it and their conceptions of it shift "like the variants of a folktale." At moments like this, the book folds back onto the ordinary world of something-to-be-said, a developed understanding of oral narratives. In effect, folklore studies are repaying their debt to the everyday expression that funded their growth as a discipline.

The treatment of the folklore of steel is along these lines. Where once *märchen* and other elaborate narratives were collected, now conversational anecdotes about work will be tape-recorded. This is the innovation and drawback of Dorson's method. The personal experience narratives given in his text (each new narrative is marked with a star to distinguish it from Dorson's commentary), are clear evidence of a lively tradition among steel workers of stories about "the old days," deaths and accidents, and a covert revolt against demeaning work in stories of millrats, thefts, canteen ripoffs, and goofing off. Dorson finds that for young workers "ferocious rats fit naturally into the scene of ugliness, tedium, and unrelieved desolation they associated with their jobs." (94) Workers in the steel plants are themselves dubbed "millrats" throughout the region.

At its best, Dorson's book does much more than claim new territory for his discipline. *Land of the Millrats* offers the potential of a folklore returned to its

everyday foundation: "Half of the students in my fall 1975 class had a personal crime experience to relate. Muggings, holdups, robberies, rapes, murders, assaults, break-ins, vandalism, thefts of cars and car parts — all breed cycles of tales that enjoy ever-widening distribution." (213) Beneath the weariness of the list, is a realization that the characterization and narrative styles of these tales follow the pattern of traditional storytelling. Indeed the *märchen* and legends so eagerly "collected" by earlier generations of folklorists would have been in the same vulgar way, expressions of sadness, estrangement, tragedy, and revolt.

We have, in conclusion, not one but several techniques of industrial folklore study, each associated with a different formation or research institution within the discipline.¹⁹ There is no doubt that this diversity of approach is useful and even necessary. It is a serious and growing corpus and one that should not be ignored by historians and others, or dismissed with offhand remarks about romanticism and "lack of objectivity."

The third part of this review article has appeared in a slightly different form in The Lexicon (Bethune College, York University), 3 March 1982. I would like to thank the editor for permission to reprint. This overview of the literature is part of ongoing research into the industrial folklore of typographical workers in Toronto. The sponsorship of this research project by the Department of Labour — University Research Committee is gratefully acknowledged.

¹⁹ For my own contribution see Alan O'Connor, "The Real Live Type: Research Techniques in a Industrial Folklore Project," *Canadian Folklore/Folklore Canadien*, 3, no. 2 (1981), 149-52.