FOLKLORE AND FAKE LORE

BY *RICHARD M. DORSON*

During the past two decades, the subject of American folklore has not only won the attention of more and more academicians, but has also won widespread interest among the general reading public. It therefore merits critical examination. Dr. Dorson, who questions many of the current writings on folklore, is eminently qualified to discuss the subject. He is associate professor of American history at Michigan State College, and the author of Jonathan Draws the Long Bow, *a collection of New England folk-tales. James Stevens is one of the most respected and popular writers of folklore. Perhaps his best known books are* Paul Bunyan *and* Mattock, *but he has written half a dozen more.*

IN A democratic society the values of folklore rank especially high. Folklore study builds bridges from the intellectuals to the unlettered, from the native-born to the foreign-born, from one nationality group to another. It can dispel our ignorance of America's many cultural traditions, and restore faith and pride to "minorities" smarting under the stigma of alien backgrounds. As a field for graduate students it offers fresh and fruitful opportunities in grass-roots history and popular literature, to replace the fetid dissertations that reshuffle old bones.

In recent years folklore has boomed mightily, and reached a wide audience through best-selling books, concert and cabaret folksingers, even Walt Disney cartoons. But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people. Americans may be insufficiently posted on their history and culture, as the famous New York *Times* survey indicated, but their knowledge of these subjects is erudition, compared with what they know about their own folklore. The saddest aspect of this fraud is that the spurious article is so dull and thin, and the genuine material so salty and rich.

Take the Paul Bunyan business. The idea that the giant lumberjack represents the only indigenous American myth, trumpeted on every blurb that commends the newest Bunyan

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book, has become indestructible. A host of lesser imitations follows the leader, all cast in the same mold: Pecos Bill the cowboy, John Henry the Negro steel-driver, Tony Beaver the West Virginia logger, Febold Feboldson the Nebraska plainsman, and so on. These comic demigods are not products of a native mythology, but rather of a chauvinist and fascist conception of folklore. They must be 100 per cent native American supermen, all-conquering, all-powerful, braggart and whimsically destructive. By such distorted folk symbols the Nazis supported their thesis of a Nordic super-race, and touted Hitler as their greatest folklorist.

Folklore by any definition requires the proof of oral vitality. The tales, songs, sayings, crafts, pass down the generations by word of mouth. Print may help along their distribution, but a tale that lives only in print is literary, not folk. The wider the gulf between the written and spoken forms, the less chance exists for traditions to cross back and forth. With the Paul Bunyan and other hero tales, an impossible gap separates the slender vein of oral anecdote from the dressed up, invented, or derivative stories that have cascaded from the presses since the 1920s. Yet the books all profess to contain pristine folkstuff.

These books err in several ways. The long, continuous narratives they contain do not correspond to the terse, fragmentary jokes that woodsmen occasionally do tell about Paul Bunyan. Their soupy tone suits childish readers, but rather misses the lumberjack idiom in such tales as are told.

> The Blue Ox used to look fancy when he went out with nine bales of hay stacked on one horn and seven bags of feed on the other. Every time he'd crap it'd take the crew three days to swamp around the pile. During the Winter of the Blue Snow, one of Paul's men climbed a tree and couldn't get down. It was so cold that Paul told him to pass water. He did, it froze, and the jack slid down on the icicle.

The books give the impression that lumberjacks spend all their spare time telling Bunyan stories. Actually, they talk mostly about tough camp bosses, epic whisky-drinking bouts and eye-gouging fights, insatiable lice and illiterate French-Canadians. North Michigan loggers yarn mainly about P. K. Small, a jack with a cast-iron stomach who would eat dried manure and drink from spittoons for a shot of whisky.

Authors proudly stamp Bunyan as the embodiment of the American soul. James Stevens says in the introduction to his book that Paul Bunyan "is absolutely American from head to foot. He visualizes perfectly the American love of tall talk and tall

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doings, the true American exuberance and extravagance." But tall-tale heroes thrive in the folklore of many peoples. The Finns possess a duplicate hero in Big Matt, who runs through the same course of literary adoption. The Chippewa storyteller Iagoo, reported by Schoolcraft, draws a familiar long bow. I have heard French-Canadian marvels about the prodigious strength of Max Duhaim, Polish whoppers about strong man Juro Janosek, Hungarian exploits about Háry János.

Stevens is a badly mixed up man. In an expanded introduction to a new edition of his book, he squeals at the Ph.D.s and professors who ask him for documentation. Then he admits spending three years looking for some, in vain. He now mentions six story-tellers by name, and a "hundred" others anonymously, but gives no texts. He says that his Paul Bunyan is the real McCoy, but that he invented most of it. He accuses other authors of stealing his legend — which he has assigned to all America — even if they heard it from jacks, for the jacks read it in his book. I would like to meet the lumberjack who would recite such stuff — or any novel — aloud. He calls himself a "timber beast and sawdust savage," and writes fluff. In a final triumph he extracts support from his old friend Stewart Holbrook. "Stevens picked his Paul out of an old pile of Douglas fir slash he found in a clearing on the west slope of Mt. Rainer" (although a page earlier Stevens has said Paul belongs to the Lake States, not to the Far West). Yet Holbrook himself told me he never ran onto Bunyan tales when he wrote *Holy Old Mackinaw!*

How is a Paul Bunyan book made, assuming one does not steal Mr. Stevens' cutesy inventions? I called on Stanley Newton of the Soo at the time his *Paul Bunyan of the Great Lakes* was in press. Had he gathered his stories over the years from Michigan loggers, as his publishers blurbed? No. He culled a column of Bunyan yarns he had edited in a local magazine. Sometimes he inserted a good outside story he knew. Sometimes he composed. This was honest naïveté, for I had read the column and talked with the lumberjacks, and found no connection between the dismal inventions contributors slipped in the mail, like contestants sending in another Burma-Shave jingle for the roadside, and the rugged humor of boardinghouse and barroom talk. Why then did the author promote his book as genuine American folklore? The answer, of course, is that this promotion sells books, especially to the tourist trade which he had primarily aimed at. Paul Bunyan is big business; a $50,000 corporation was

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formed several years ago to merchandise his folklore. To reach the Russian market (this was four years ago), Mr. Newton included the Russian people in his dedication, and declared that Paul emanates from Ilya Murometz — who was a medieval Russian dragon-slayer.

The straight Bunyan formula can be varied by giving the oversized clown different names — Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, John Henry, Tony Beaver, Old Stormalong — and billing the book as a gallery of native demigods.

It seems not to matter that these heroes are either largely dreamed up, like Tony Beaver, or that they belong to quite disparate traditions. John Henry is lifted from a Negro tragic ballad and Davy Crockett from pre-Civil War comic almanacs, but they are easily put through the mangle and pressed into Paul Bunyan shape for the kids. A local writer invents a Cornish Paul Bunyan right out of his head, Angus Murdoch puts him in *Boom Copper*, Grace Lee Nute follows Murdoch in *Lake Superior*, and a new fake hero is born — the "immortal" Dick Buller with the fifteen-mile voice. Carl Carmer even took the legendary New Orleans whore, Annie Christmas, and set her into a syrupy bedtime story, in a hero-book designed to elevate and instruct American youth.

II

Some compilers, riding the vogue for comic heroes and tall tales, have lately taken to rummaging through old and new books and magazines, and pasting together large albums vended as American folklore. The treasuries of Ben Botkin and Ben Clough stretch the term folklore out of all meaning, and shrink the definition of American to old stock Anglo-Saxons.

These editors snip busily in all directions, gathering in old jokes, fiction stories, biographical anecdotes, newspaper articles, travellers' jottings, and even some folklore. They use a great variety of ready-at-hand sources, excepting the most difficult and valuable, the ante-bellum newspaper, and the most obvious, the folk themselves. They purport to cover America, when a man in his lifetime can barely know the lore of a county. The solid folklore of one county or one town will not sell, of course, in such numbers as an omnibus with American in its title. Having succeeded at the box office with his *Treasury of American Folklore*, Mr. Botkin now embarks on a series of regional treasuries. In this program he never budges from the library, like the dude fisherman who buys his catch at the market.

Professional folklorists have done little systematic field work in the United States, apart from folksong,

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and the lack cannot be overcome by culling from nostalgic antiquarians or local color journalists. Printed sources for folklore can, within limits and with pains, be rewardingly used, and *field collecting can be easily abused.* But ultimately, to get the full-bodied lore, someone somewhere along the line must talk to the folk, and if the results are to be worthwhile, he must talk intelligently and purposefully. He needs to probe the community, to locate the master story-tellers, to win confidences, to strike the mother lode. He must have careful plans in mind, and yet be resourceful enough to follow unsuspected leads and undiscovered veins. He has to sort out tradition from guff, to capture tangy personalities, to collect with pedantic care and write up his finds with the excitement that belongs to living matter. Then, perhaps, we can tell what the lore is, where it lies, who possesses it, who are the folk.

Mr. Botkin's treasuries tell us none of these things. Does lore differ for social classes, for men of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, for a Maine islander and a Rhode Island textile worker, for a Yankee and an Italian? Because his sources cannot aid him, he gives us no close-ups of story-telling action or folk societies. Because we cannot trust them, we never are sure how much is real tradition, or what has been left out. I can testify that his bulky collections barely graze the country's folklore wealth. His Anglo-Saxon sources provide an endless suffocation of tall tales and gags, but not a single instance of the blood-stopping charm, or the dialect yarn, or the personal saga — since these are unreported forms, though widespread, known only to the folk. Mr. Botkin defines folklore, fairly enough, as "the stuff that travels and the stuff that sticks." But this is not the same as the stuff that is shoveled together to fill a bargain volume.

III

The exclusive nativism of the American folklore sold in anthologies and taught in schools does both social and cultural injustice. I fail to see why the English witch deserves a priority in American folktales over the German *hexe*, the Irish banshee, the Italian *strega*, the Jewish *golem*, the Finnish *noita*, the Norwegian *nisse*, the Polish *czarowniça*, and other demonic beings intimately known to millions of Americans. One fourth of America's people are foreign-born or first-generation, and in the dense Northern states the figure rises to one half. Yet the marvelously rich lore of Europe and Asia thus planted on our shores, a folk heritage no other country can remotely equal, remains in shadow. More than that, it is scorned and

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derided by the pressures of school and society, until the immigrants' children feel shame for their family culture, for their second tongue, for their own names. "When the kids in school heard me speaking Flemish they poked fun at me and said I wasn't American," a newspaper editor told me. "So I have never spoken Flemish since." Thelma James of Wayne University tells the story of the rich Americanized Lithuanians who hid their parents in an upstairs room and let them come out only at night, when their oddity of dress and language would not be noticed. When the professor paid the old couple a special visit, to record their folk-songs, the children regarded them with a new respect, and thereafter trotted them out in broad daylight.

The nativists miss many good bets. The Grimms' classic fairy tales continue to hold American readers, but live versions in many nationality traditions can be procured here and now, versions often showing new American impacts. For example: in the well known tale of the flight from the dragon, the hero throws magic articles in his path which impede the monster; the twig becomes a forest, the stone a mountain. But illiterate old Trefflé Largenesse of Marquette, Mich., gives his hero a bar of soap and a rusty razor; the dragon sputters and chokes in a mountain of soap, and cuts himself fatally thrashing through a sky-high pile of old razors.

Each ethnic group prizes its own popular heroes and saints and epic victories. This folk history makes good listening, and often it synchronizes with democratic traditions. Jussi the Workman, known to the Finns (a major stock in Michigan and Minnesota) as the migratory champion of the oppressed peasants, mocked and undermined the landlords wherever he hired out. I give one tale. Jussi, ploughing in the fields, took ill with cramps and left his work to relieve himself in the woods. His master bawled him out for leaving the job. Next day Jussi took up a tract alongside the public road, wearing only a shirt, and followed the plough steadily all day, fertilizing the field as he went. When passers-by asked him why he did this, he replied, "Our master is so mean he will not give us time for s —— g." Jussi combines the propaganda talents of Tom Paine and the reforming instinct of Henry George. You'll not find him, or his many counterparts, in United States folk collections.

IV

The nativists, the juvenilists and the dabblers market folklore as child-stuff, arch and droll, quaint and shimmery, bygone and dreamy. While

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their fare may be more preferable reading for children than the blood-and-thunder comic books of the news-stand, it is not folklore. The folk mind is tough and earthy, and not unaware of the facts of life. Adults tell fairy tales, to adults, although the maudlinized and castrated samples in print belie the fact.

Mr. Botkin clips tender superstitions on cobwebs and chickweed and lilac petals. ("If it goes down smoothly, the dabbler in magic cries out, 'He loves me'; if she chokes at her floral food, she must say sadly, 'He loves me not.'") He includes nothing like the Italian folk belief in the *fattura*, which an Italian saloon-keeper told me in a sweat.

A man with evil power can make you impotent. In the Old Country John Berdino could not raise an erection on his wedding night, and knew he was under the *fattura*. He told his wife to pad out her stomach with a pillow, a little more each month. Finally a man stopped him on the street and said, "Goddamn, I don't believe in that *fattura* any more." "Why not?" "Well, your wife in the family way." He showed Berdino where he had buried hair knots from a horse's tail. Berdino loosened the knots, and his penis flew up. Then he shot the spell-maker dead. When the town heard, it approved. "There's a fellow over here in Iron Mountain can do that," said Sam Colasacco. "He can tie up the blood of a man who marries a virgin, by saying the words. When his son get marry, his father tie him up. In the morning he asks him, 'How do you make out last night?' His son said, 'I couldn't do nothing.'"

The Indians have fared the worst from the sugar-coaters. One illustration will do. Near Manistique, Mich., a rectangular body of water framed by the forest attracts thousands of summer visitors, who have seen pictures and postcards of the "Big Spring." The tourist literature plays heavily on an Indian romance blighted on this spot, and the area's publicity director recites it in booming tones. I summarize the unbroken series of maudlin clichés.

The beauteous Onnandacie (little firefly) and the stalwart Kitchitikipi (I love you) paddled up a stream and came to the Big Spring, where they moored their birchen canoe. "And there, in the moonlight, dreaming, planning, whispering to each other the sweet mouthings of love, they pledged their troth." But in a playful mood the gal ran out on the trunk of an overhanging tree, and the brave, in following hard after, lost his balance and plunked in. When he failed to arise, Little Firefly went off her nut, mumbled "Kitchitikipi" all day long, and eventually took a

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running jump into the Spring, so she could join her dream man in the Happy Hunting Ground. "And to this day, my friends, if you will visit the Spring, of a moonlight evening, in the month of May, when the gentle breezes are moving through the overhanging pine trees and rippling its surface, if you will listen intently, you will hear the waters of the Spring murmuring the name of the Indian lover — Kitchitikipi, Kitchitikipi, Kitchitikipi."

Indians do have a legend about the Big Spring. The Thunder pulled the Serpent up into the sky, leaving a big hole in the ground, which filled with water. Chippewa mythology centers around the conflict between sky and underwater powers.

The Indians don't talk about romantic love, since they regard women as functional, not decorative. "Whence these stories, whence these legends and traditions?" A Chamber of Commerce secretary, whom I asked about some local landmarks publicized as The Bathtub of the Gods, Bridal Wreath Falls, and Caves of the Bloody Chiefs, said matter-of-factly "they were Indian legends we had to make up for the tourists." And that in a country larded with Chippewa reservations, where the real, pungent Indian tales still vigorously thrive! A week later I split my sides laughing when Chief Herbert Welsh told a mixed audience the Sioux favorite about Iktomi and the forbidden fruits. When Iktomi ate too many wild turnips, he became afflicted with gas, bounding off the earth with each step until he had to lie full length and clasp his arms around a stump to keep from being blown heavenwards.

Finally it should be noted that children generate their own lore, which is savage rather than sticky. Bouncing ball rhymes exist all right, but so do derisive chants and cries.

> There she goes, there she goes,
> All dressed up in her Sunday clothes.
> Ain't she sweet? Ain't she sweet?
> All but the stink of her dirty feet.

V

Any intelligible analysis of American folklore must, I suggest, recognize one primary fact: that there is no such thing as the lore of the nation, or of regions, but only the lore of groups. These groups are ethnic, and the United States absorbs the world; they are occupational, based in common trades and jobs and apprenticeships, that range from cowboys to college students; they are communal, knit by genealogy and local history. Each group owns an esoteric body of anecdote and custom and song, commonplace to its members but bizarre to the outsider. The French Canadian laughs knowingly when you mention the *loup-garou;* the Chippewa Indian

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when you say "Winabijou"; the native of Menominee when you inquire about the McDonald Boys; the coed, when you ask her to sing "Minnie the Mermaid"; the Wall Street broker when quizzed about the fabled Chauncy Depew; and the GI, when pumped about Kilroy.

Everyone belongs to some folk group, or to more than one, you and I too, no matter how urban and sophisticated we consider ourselves. The college campus and the district high school overflow with legends of eccentric professors, feats of cheating, traditions of the virgin coed, stories of fatal fraternity initiations, folksongs of amour, admonitions of the Dean of Women, textbook inscriptions, secret cries. In the folk ideas of such groups we can perceive traditional values, *tabus*, obsessions, humors, which bind its members in tight fraternities, and divide American society into many chambers. It is time we began exploring these chambers.

At all odds, folklore needs to be gathered and interpreted with insight, integrity, and some sense of social meanings. In Europe folklore scholarship has long enjoyed prestige, and contributed illustrious names to the humanities, from the brothers Grimm to Sir James Frazer. In the United States it is rapidly forfeiting the respect of most serious students of the American scene.

FOLKLORE AND THE ARTIST

BY *JAMES STEVENS*

I SWING on Dr. Dorson's charge, "Stevens is a badly mixed up man [on Paul Bunyan]," and bat it right back at him. His confusion is between the tasks of the anthropologist and those of the artist with folklore. To illustrate the distinction: Here in the Puget Sound country is Dr. Erna Gunther, head of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Washington, who has labored effectively to collect genuine items from the perishing folklore of the region's Indian tribes; and here in the person of the author, is an old weaver in the ancient art of tale-making who devises patterns of his own from the lore of woodsmen. The scientist of long technical training and experience will use folklore to reflect vital phases of human tribes in times past. The artist adopts folklore for the work of his

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