



Folklore and Traditional History.

Review Author[s]:
Alan Macfarlane

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WOOD, MANFRI FREDERICK. *In the life of a Romany gypsy*; edited by Jihna A. Bruno, illustrated by Andrew Young. viii, 130 pp., illus. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973. £2.50

The author's aims in writing this book are 'to clear up some of the misunderstandings that exist to this day between my people and the Gorgios' (Gorgios being non-Gypsies) and to describe the Romany's traditional way of life. Yet the book has another implicit aim, to capture the remaining vestiges of Romany life and language before they disappear. The book conveys a sadness at the decline of this life with its absorption into industrial-bureaucratic society: in a humorous section on methods of poaching, the author comments that he has not done any recently; 'nowadays I have a shooting licence, an occasional fishing licence and sometimes even get asked to a hunt'. While recalling herbal medicines, he regrets that Gypsies mostly go to G.P.s and chemists now: 'the plants we used to use for medicines might be poisoned by insecticides and other sprays, artificial manures (and) exhausts from cars.'

The book also portrays the ambivalent relationship between Gypsies and the host society. While emphasising their separateness, Romany Gypsies are intricately involved with Gorgios, as symbolised in the traditional burial practices: 'the handling and laying out of the corpse was always supposed to be done by people outside the tribe and if possible not by Gypsies but by Gorgios'. However, many customs and values described here distinguish the social situation of the poor and persecuted generally and are not exclusive to Gypsies. Wood's descriptions of unique features of Romany life (e.g. the discussion of taboos and marriage customs), are rather unsatisfactory. Further questioning might produce answers: the author says a list of all taboos would fill a book; sometimes one suspects the knowledge is already lost.

The book is of interest therefore as a document which captures one perspective on the Romany way of life. It is humorous, its anecdotes bear the quality of a 'tale', telling as much of Gypsy values as of past events. And particularly, the final section describing the author's sentiments, living close to nature, have quite simply a poetic beauty: 'the grunt of the badger in the undergrowth . . . the buzzing of the bees as they fly from bloom to bloom along a hedgerow . . . the feeling of uncertainty.'

SUSANNE WOOD

Birkbeck College, London

DORSON, RICHARD M. (ed.). *Folklore and traditional history*. 118 pp. The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1973

This collection of essays attempts to confront a serious problem, 'the question of the historical validity and ethnocentric bias in oral history' (p. 7). For both anthropologist and historian, non-written sources of information are increasing in importance. In many societies they are the *only* material with which to reconstruct the past; in others they are the only source for many of the intimate details of ordinary life, for insights into the fundamental yet normally unrecorded assumptions upon which people base their lives. In principle, therefore, the volume can be welcomed. Yet the result is disappointing. The introduction, and first brief essay by Bynum on 'Oral evidence and the historian: problems and methods', say very little. There follow two short and specialised pieces on 'Homer, the Trojan War, and history' by Lord and 'Old Norse epic and historical tradition' by Ciklamini. There is then a useful discussion of sources for Fulbe (Mali, Guinea, Senegal) history by Robinson, including sensible advice on the collection and depositing of data (p. 31). The sources are carefully compared and 'argue for close relationships among these three categories of sources and between the oral and written modes in general' (p. 37). Daaku then discusses the oral traditions of the Akan, very broadly interpreted to include the music of the drums, oaths, etc. (p. 45). The results are somewhat inconclusive. The most intriguing essay is a well-written and balanced investigation by Klein into the folklore tradition that King Charles XII of Sweden was killed by one of his own soldiers firing a metal button at him. It is a minor incident, but useful evidence that oral traditions do sometimes preserve historical facts which are otherwise unrecorded. Finally there is a long essay by the editor on 'Sources for the traditional history of the Scottish highlands and western islands', which is a discussion of oral material gathered by the School of Scottish Studies, the Dewar Manuscripts and, somewhat surprisingly, the historical novels of John Prebble. There are some pleasant descriptions, but at an analytic level the results are superficial. In conclusion, it is possible that specialists in the above fields, particularly in the areas studied by Klein and Robinson, might find some of the discussion of value, but the more general reader will probably feel that the collection should have been published in a folklore journal, rather than as a separate monograph.

ALAN MACFARLANE

University of Cambridge