THOUGHTS ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY AND FOLKLORE

By PHIL R. JACK*

A PENNSYLVANIA historian once asked whether folklore could be taken out of the circus tent. There is enough evidence to indicate that at least one phase of folkloristic activity has taken place in a carnival atmosphere, but it is also clear that another phase exists which should prove profitable to historians. Some description of that part will be one aim of this essay; another will be an attempt to point out possible uses of folklore by historians and, to a lesser degree, the use of history by folklorists.

In a consideration of the fields of folklore and history there is a minor element which seems to have been blown up into major proportions: it is no secret that there exists in both fields of study a large body of well-intentioned people who approach the status of mere antiquarians or hopeless romanticists. To equate these groups with the self- or academically-trained folklorists and historians would be to invite all sorts of indignant rebuttals, and justly so. Such dabblers should be tolerated but not encouraged. Certainly their work should not be considered as the standard by which their groups should be judged, and neither the folklorists nor the historians should be asked to use their material.

A “folk” song delivered on a concert stage as a thing in and by itself without representation of its milieu, the traditional background, is only a song which is fulfilling some cultural use other than folk in nature. Similarly, any statement about folk-derived items such as a quilt pattern, a dance, or fiddle tune, again lifted from its context and claimed to depict the “hardy spirit” of our forefathers, should be suspect. There are like examples within the field of history. Historians are not, or at least should not be, judged by the activities of those persons delighting in the exploits of their own ancestors, or those who scrounge around the countryside looking for a cobbler’s bench for the living room.

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In both instances these people are dealing with items folkloristic or historical, but they are neither folklorists nor historians.

To the working folklorists and historians the fundamental difference between folklore and history, in their broad aspects, is not one of basic content. Both have consistently studied the cultural heritage of man. However, the folklorist distinguishes his material by focusing on traditional characteristics, that is, those transmitted by oral or visual examples. Tradition is not a thing in itself, but is a method of transmission. The historian, on the other hand, does not restrict himself in this way, but stresses change and development. In many cases, historians should use folkloristic materials that tend to show this change.

From both points of view, the background of the people is important. Folklore and history are both derived from the past, the folklorist concentrating on the materials, while the historian concentrates on the change. For instance, the folklorist tries to separate and identify the constant elements (motifs), as Preston Barba did in his *Pennsylvania German Tombstones*. Also, he would note the changes in the stones over a period of time (ca. 1750 to 1850). The historian probably would have used the gravestones to trace the development of the religion. Similarly, in a recent study by folklorists of the Pennsylvania barn, the barns as structures were stressed, although an introductory chapter was presented on the various backgrounds of the barns. An agricultural historian, Stevenson W. Fletcher, noted primarily the changes in farming, although he did note the buildings as such.

The student interested in traditional veterinary medicine might well work with the disease of cattle called "wolf in the tail" and the cures found for it. Knowledge of and treatment for this disease were passed along by oral tradition and example. General lassitude of the animal was the most noticeable symptom, and

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2. See William E. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (New York, 1957), 82-126, for a discussion of a similar point of view.
the usual cure was to slit the tail somewhere near the end and put in some substance which would burn or sting the animal into action. But this was only one of several cures. The folklorist would be interested in where the disease was known and what the cures were for it. The historian of veterinary medicine would not approach it from that point of view, but would be more likely to trace the growth of knowledge of the disease from place to place and from time to time. In addition, he would probably try to determine what developments preceded and followed this disease and its treatments. Here is an instance in which the historian of veterinary medicine might well use folkloristic work as an index in a study of the spread of scientific medicine.

Now it might be worthwhile to point out a few of the particular characteristics of the folklorists' work. For personal convenience, this writer has established five fields in which folklorists appear to have done their work. They are (1) attitudes, (2) symbols, (3) tangible property, (4) laws, and (5) non-tangible minutiae. Again, these are usually studied as ends in themselves. Attitudes might be such matters as love, honor, or the agrarian creed. Symbols consist of such items as crosses, flags, or trademarks, while tangible property is made up of houses, barns, clothing, and like elements. Laws for the folklorist are unwritten. Non-tangible minutiae might be riddles, tales, or songs.

The above areas of study are often surveyed as separate units, or they are studied as they are found in conjunction with one another or as they are found in a particular region at a particular time. By way of contrast, historians utilize to a considerable degree the social, political, and economic divisions of their field. Also, the element of time is often an important trademark. The maximum use of folklore by historians will occur when the historian is dealing with the part of his subject that involves tradition. Such areas of interest could be selected on the basis of a geographical region, a specified time, or a subject. The following paragraph is an illustration of this point.

In mid- and late-nineteenth century western Pennsylvania, there was a faith, highly valued, in man's achieving a better home in another world. That attitude can be found symbolized in ceme-

\footnote{There is disagreement on this point. See V. Gordon Childe, \textit{Social Evolution} (London, 1951), 14; Alfred L. Kroeber, \textit{The Nature of Culture} (Chicago, 1952), 64.}
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teries by gravestones with a finger pointed skyward, often with such a legend as "There is rest above." Songs, such as Mein Heimat Ist Nicht Hier, were indications of such a belief. If, by 1900, the skyward-pointed finger has disappeared in a Methodist cemetery, and the Greek Orthodox cross is used, there has been a change. Quickly it will be noted that the materials of folklore and history are coming close together. The example just cited would fit easily into the historian's frame of reference. Cultural elements are not things in themselves, and it can readily be seen that an inter-disciplinary approach can be used. A diminishing form found in one field can often be used in another. For example, as most collectors will readily admit, the day of collecting large numbers of Anglo-American folksongs is gone, and this fact is of interest to historians as an indication of the change from rural to urban living.

Following this line of thought, historians should encourage folklorists to do as much collecting as possible, for it is only in this way that traditional materials of value to historians will be increased in volume and in quantity. There is, of course, no reason to believe that all the work done in either history or folklore should be done with the other group in mind. All that can be claimed is that it is valuable to try to use the fruits of the other discipline when the occasion arises. In historiography the proper use of fields auxiliary to history is predicated on that premise. Perhaps by propounding two questions some indication of the closeness of folklore and history can be pointed out.

The first question is this: what was and is the folklore of Pennsylvania? The second question is: what changes have taken place? The answer for the first can in part be obtained from literary (i.e., historical) sources, such as Doddridge's Notes, while the rest must of necessity be obtained from field collections. Answering these questions will involve the historians quickly and in

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While there might be much debate on the net effect and value of Ranke's view of history, there is little debate on the question of heuristics, Ranke's primary step in historical study, as a method of first approach. See Ferdinand Schevill, Six Historians (Chicago, 1956), 128.

several ways, and as the answers will be concerned with the lives of
the people in the past, historical materials will thereby be enhanced.
Finally, it should be made clear that there will never be an answer
for the second question unless there is an answer for the first.

These two questions will lead to others. What were the chief
characteristics of Pennsylvania folklore? What were its sources?
What brought about the changes that occurred? What were the
later effects of these changes? Above all, the major question
should be: is there, or was there, a process involved? By any
yardstick, processes are historical.

Folklorists and historians must make certain allowances, and at
the same time insist on certain requirements, for each other.
Historians should recognize that much folkloristic work is done
with items of seemingly little import. It is not the minute item that
is of importance, but the total of many items. In the last analysis
this is no different from the historian's approach. Also important
is the attention given to variation by the folklorist, for his ma-
terials, because of their traditional nature, are not based on any
standard form. A fixed standard is more characteristic of a literate
culture. Field-collected material is contemporary; that is, it is
fixed as of the moment that it is collected. However, if historical
reconstruction is the goal, then the ordinary precautions used in
the handling of any historical evidence should be employed. Ques-
tions of historical genesis are always difficult to deal with, par-
ticularly if the era involved is characterized by an almost com-
pletely traditional transmission of knowledge.

On the other hand, historians are entitled to require certain
things of the folklorists. Because traditional materials are so
closely tied to particular times, places, and persons, folklorists
should cite chapter and verse about all three. The traditional
nature of the material should be demonstrated clearly. Historians
also have the right to ask whether the main purpose of folklore is
simply entertainment. If the answer is negative, then the historians
should insist that the endless square dance programs, folksong
concerts, and the displaying of unique items be stopped, or at
least not passed off as scholarly work. In general, historians should
require that folklore materials be handled in a responsible man-
ner, and not in some romantic way that only emphasizes the
quaintness of the subject.

So far, not much has been said about the use of history by
folklorists. Nevertheless, there is at least one instance in which this use becomes quite important, and that is in building up the contextual setting for traditional materials. This lack of context has been fully appreciated by one major American folklorist,12 and there is reason to believe that the more general use of historical materials by Pennsylvania folklorists would do much to overcome it. Robert Redfield makes the point that most groups which rely primarily on tradition have also had contacts with literate groups, and have therefore had a history.18 Certainly this is true of Pennsylvanians no matter which period is under study. Understanding will increase in direct proportion to a knowledge of the materials and their contexts.

For this reason folklorists should ask the historians to cease relying entirely on literary sources, for in many cases accuracy cannot be obtained in this way.14 It is clear that culture is not merely that body of knowledge perpetuated in literary form and assigned some sort of value judgment. The impression is so often given that this written culture moved westward into a vacuum peopled by human beings in a state of cultural inanition, who then received their only true learning from representatives of the eastern seaboard. This makes for striking reading in history, but it also makes for a poor study of the life of man.

18 See Solon J. and Elizabeth H. Buck, _The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania_ (Pittsburgh, 1939), 364, wherein music is defined clearly as art music only, and Fletcher, _Pennsylvania Agriculture_, 340, wherein superstition is treated as a thing apart and unique in the farmers' thought.