

Review Article

Australian Folklore: An American Folklorist's Appraisal

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For folklorists with interests in comparative and American folklore alike, Australia offers compelling parallels. Both America and Australia are new countries relative to Old World Europe; have an often shameful and always vexed record with indigenous peoples; had formative relationships with the British empire; foster artistic and academic “high” cultures suffused with Anglo-envy; were nonetheless deeply affected by the “low” cultures of imprisoned and immigrant peoples; engaged in policies of racist exploitation and exclusion regarding Asians; were shaped by a prolonged frontier experience that included a gold rush, isolated settlements, cattle kings, roving bands of itinerant male workers, outlawry, and self-reliant egalitarianism; and a good deal more. Likewise the efforts of American and Australian folklorists to investigate the richly diverse traditions of their particular nations have followed similar trajectories, albeit not concurrently, and have been affected by similar social, economic, and political currents.

As a folklorist focused on American life yet deeply committed to a comparative perspective, I confess a fascination with Australia that has persisted for more than forty years. In 1967 I was fortunate to forego two semesters of high school in Wisconsin to spend a year “down under” as an American Field Service exchange student in Melbourne, attending sixth form at Scotch College. The folk revival and folk rock were in full swing, and I spent some time in dimly lit Melbourne coffeehouses listening to scruffy performers singing “Botany Bay” and “Click Go the Shears” as audience members chimed in on choruses. As my school year ended I received a copy of Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958) as a prize. This classic study, which drew upon folk balladry and related vernacular poetry as the primary sources for understanding the Australian ethos (and is aptly reassessed on the eve of its fiftieth “birthday” in the 2007 edition of *Australian Folklore*), profoundly affected my development as a folklorist and was a major influence on my 1973 MA thesis at the University of North Carolina, a comparison of ballads and legends concerning Australian and American frontier outlaws. Fifteen years later, I was delighted by the distinguished presence of three founding members of the Australian Folklore Association – Hugh Anderson, Gwenda Davey, and Graham Seal – at the centennial meeting of the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia. And in 1996, when I finally returned to Australia for the first time, I had the pleasure of meeting with the folk music scholar, field researcher, and record producer Alan Musgrove; with Susan Faine, then director of the admirable and sadly de-funded Victorian Folklife Association, a multicultural public folklore organisation paralleling those in the USA; and with Gwenda Davey, for whom I gave a talk on public folklore just prior to her launching a visionary but unfortunately shortlived Graduate Diploma in Australian Folklife Studies at Monash University in Melbourne.

Those who seek to understand Australia's remarkable folk cultural traditions, as well as their relationship to the work of dedicated researchers and often fragile, ephemeral institutions might begin with *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* (1993), a comprehensive, expert, and appropriately illustrated encyclopedia edited by Gwenda Davey and Graham Seal. Meanwhile the journal, *Australian Folklore*, which first appeared in 1987 as an occasional publication, has emerged into a substantial nearly annual compilation. The anticipation of *Australian Folklore's* twenty fifth edition is an appropriate occasion to remark on the journal's significance. Hence I will sketch the scope and worth of Nos. 19-24 (2004-2008) from the perspective of an American folklorist who, although decidedly an Americanist, is nonetheless perpetually intrigued by the interests and accomplishments of Australian colleagues.

Edited by J. S. Ryan of the School of English, Communication, and Theatre at the University of New England, with the assistance of Robert J. Smith of the School of Education at Southern Cross University, the five most recent issues of *Australian Folklore* are uniformly impressive and lively, with each volume offering nearly 300 pages of essays, notes, obituaries, biographical sketches and bibliographies for eminent folklorists, review essays, reviews, and notices, along with a useful comprehensive index for each issue. Contributors range from academically trained scholars from a wide range of humanistic and social scientific disciplines, to those who in the United States are sometimes dubbed "community scholars", i.e. curators and chroniclers of their own cultural traditions, frequent active participants in local and national cultural organisations, and "organic intellectuals" in the parlance of the cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci. At once populist, pluralist, progressive, and public, the inclusive "big tent" approach of *Australian Folklore's* editors, conjoining academicians with allied citizens in a common purpose, is especially admirable and appropriate in folklore studies, an interdisciplinary field within which researchers typically work with participants in surrounding contemporary communities to whom they have reciprocal ethical obligations.

At the same time, *Australian Folklore* also includes such astute theoretical and comparative essays with an international scope as Graham Seal's "Challenges for the Study of Australian Folk Narrative" (2007), J. S. Ryan's "Austral./Asian Cultural and Folkloric Synergies and Exchanges: A Progressive Development" (2006), and Heather King's "A Preliminary Look at Canadian Cabins in Newfoundland and Labrador, and at Australian Shacks in New South Wales" (2007). While King's study and several essays – like Sylvia Grider's on the memorialisation of mostly American school tragedies (2005) and Simon J. Sherwood's on the ghostly "Black Dogs of England" (2006) – call appropriate attention to Australia's historical and contemporary relationship with the North America and Great Britain, Ryan's Asian orientation is complemented by several excellent focused pieces regarding aspects of folklore in South/East/ Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands; exemplary among them: Ismet Fanany's insightful examination of continuity and change in the folklore genres and worldview of West Sumatra's Minangkabau people (2005) and Janie Conway Herron's powerful and timely "Narrative and Advocacy: Burma's Identity Through its Women's Voices" (2007).

Elsewhere, as might be expected, the contributors of various essays and reviews are chiefly concerned with the folklore of Australians, much of which is bound up with the experience of being Australian. Editors Ryan and Smith commendably offer frequent special or focused sections within each annual that respectively concern folklore associated with Australian railways (2004), the memorialisation of the past through placenames and roadside shrines (2004), memoirs (2004), contemporary storytelling (2004), animal legends and the supernatural (2004), indigenous matters (2005), folk music (2005), foodways (2006), mining (2007), and children's folklore (2008). Studies of children's folklore, a field wherein Australian folklorists have done distinguished work since the 1960s, may also be found in two studies of school playground games and rhymes in 2006 and another in 2007. Meanwhile considerations of Australian folk and vernacular music are especially abundant. Numerous essays chronicle bush poets, song catchers, and songs bound up with Australia's frontier experience. Jill Stubington's informed, insightful revelations concerning the folksong revival in Australia situates that phenomenon and one of its leading exponents, Phyl Lobl, within an international context (2004, 2005). The "Song History" of "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" – a composition of the Scottish Australian Eric Bogle and unequivocally the Australian folk revival song best known internationally – is given thorough treatment by Graham H. Dodsworth (2008). And in that same issue Max Ellis profiles Australia's prolific, iconic country singer Slim Dusty with expertise and affection.

Valuable profiles of eminent Australian folklorists – among them Hugh Anderson, Ron Edwards, Bill Scott, and Ann Trindade – are also regularly featured in *Australian Folklore*. Together with Keith McKenry's enlightening "*Australian Folklore: An Appraisal*" (2005), these essays concern individuals, institutions, and issues bound up with the conceptualisation and study of Australian folklore, thus providing significant strands of a field's intellectual history. At the same time, this particular five year run of *Australian Folklore* suggests, especially considering the increasingly multicultural nature of Australia from the late twentieth century through the present, a preoccupation with a collective or consensus approach to Australian folklore evident in the "bush" lore of British/Irish "white Australians", albeit with some inclusion of Aboriginal/ indigenous peoples. Little or no attention is devoted to the post-World War II Mediterranean (Spanish, Italian, Croatian, Greek, Lebanese) immigrants to urban areas, or the longstanding rural German settlements, or the more recently abundant presence of Asian-Australians. Chinese Australians, for example, are mentioned only in passing in connection with immigrant miners, ghost legends, New Year, food, and a fledgling joint venture to document Western Australia's Chinese community by Chinese and Australian folklorists (Hugh and Dawn Anderson, David Hulst, and Graham Seal) that was sadly cut short by the events and repressive aftermath of Tiananmen Square (Seal 2007:3). Meanwhile, an essay on "Australian Collective Sporting Culture" (2008:211-212) suggests that soccer is considered "foreign" – especially vis-à-vis such other forms of football as Australian Rules, Rugby Union, and Rugby League – because "of the ethnic flavour of senior soccer ... [and the] anti-immigrant sentiment that inhibits general public support for ethnic clubs".

Despite the relative lack of attention to Australia's cultural diversity in the 2004-2008 volumes of *Australian Folklore*, the aforementioned *Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* demonstrates amply that Australian folklorists have been well aware of and concerned with their nation's many-splendoured folklore. Much in the way that Richard Dorson and assorted American folklorists focused on New Englanders, Southern Appalachians, African Americans, American Indians, lumberjacks, and cowboys for much of the twentieth century as they sought to establish the field of folklore studies as an essential academic discipline in the United States that was also of value to the general public, Australian folklorists and their allies have thus far used *Australian Folklore* to stake out a national territory undeniably their own. Simultaneously commenting on heritage and constituting heritage-making, this sort of static, backwards-looking, Anglophile and indigenous oriented stance neglected the dynamic, contemporary, and multicultural realities of American life and, not surprisingly, was thoroughly tempered in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries by American folklorists committed to working with whatever diverse communities and traditions they encountered.

Hence, as I write this appraisal, it has been heartening to receive an advance copy of *Australian Folklore*, volume 25. In the opening Editorial assessing the journal's past issues, considering the present, and looking to the future, J. S. Ryan, on behalf of the Editorial Board of *Australian Folklore*, asserts that Australians, and especially those concerned with Australian folklore, must recognise the numerous "connections and dialogues of responsibility that make us both Pacific and near-Asian" (ix). Offering the example of "imported and adapted food cultures", Ryan goes on to argue for the inclusion of "our multiple and diverse non-British food-centered cultural practices and events" (x). Meanwhile, co-editor Robert James Smith's "Sydney and the Appearance of the Middle Eastern" focuses on Sydney's Cronulla Riots of 2005, the flawed use of "Lebanese" and "of Middle Eastern appearance" as code words for Islamic, and a spate of related folk and vernacular creations circulating through new media, all of which exemplify the critical necessity of understanding the complex ways in which folklore is employed in ongoing debates regarding the nature of Australia and Australians.

Timely, well-researched, comforting, and provocative, the impending twenty fifth edition of *Australian Folklore* is cause for celebration. Thanks to the persistence and vision of its contributors and editors, *Australian Folklore* has come of age as a journal of national **and** international significance.

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