

# Terrapins and Turniptops

OZARK SUPERSTITIONS. By Vance Randolph. New York: Columbia University Press. 1947. 339 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by THOMAS HART BENTON

VANCE RANDOLPH has investigated almost every place between the Missouri River on the north and the Ouachita River on the south, every place, in fact, where a spur of the Ozarks piles up or juts out. He is the main Ozark authority. He has collected factual stories about the region, invented stories as true as the factual ones, and gathered for the Missouri Historical Society hundreds of Ozark songs and tunes which are now being issued volume by volume. Vance has been a real hillbilly himself. Deliberately, and by preference he has lived what he writes about. He knows in a close-up fashion about corncob and hickory-chip smoked sausage and sowbelly and turniptops and plenty about what comes out of Ozark jugs, though as to this, it is said, the years have made him cautious and disinclined to continued search.

On the life he has spent and by the work which has come out of it Vance has been of very considerable service to history. He has had fun with his adventures and stories, but he has also done a job for the record that needed to be done. He has accomplished this, as he himself notes, in the face of that ignorant respectability of ambitious towns which nearly always sees truth as a slur on itself.

Vance Randolph is a pretty brave man, much braver, for instance, than I am. When I write a story or draw a true picture about a place, I get out of it and never come back. Vance stays put in the middle of his subject matter and takes the rap from the chambers of commerce, from the ladies who belong to Browning clubs (yes, we still have 'em) and from all the small-town Rotary boys who have two or three bucks extra in the bank and are intent on forgetting that Pappy smelt like hog pens and "chawin" tobacco.

In this last book about Ozark superstitions Vance stays close to the old folks and to those true children by the hills who after a look at the towns or a turn in the Army beat it back where they came from. Of these latter there are many even after the dispersals of World War II. Any run off the highways of the hill country proves it. There are still young men and women who are apparently immune to the blandishments of the radio, the movies, and the slick paper



—Thomas Hart Benton.

"I Got a Gal on Sourwood Mountain."

magazines and who would rather live and raise their kids in the shade of earth corn traditions than in the glare

of modern factory lights—cash money or no cash money. Even when they don't wholly believe the old stories these young folks act upon a lot of them in their farming and tell about them when they are loafing.

Just a few weeks ago down in an Oklahoma small-town hamburger joint I overheard a country boy say jokingly to another:

"Gonna rain like hell tonight."

"How you know?"

"Terrapins climbin' up hill. Dry land turtles never climb up unless there's gonna be too much water in the bottoms."

This is one Vance missed. I probably wouldn't have remembered it myself but for the fact that when night came it did rain. It rained a perfect flood with a scary wind to boot. This was the night of May 31 when Reedy, Oklahoma, was hit and destroyed by a tornado, and quick flood waters washed out bridges all up and down the state.

I now believe in the sign of terrapins climbing up hill, and I'll bet the boy who told it and every other backwoods Jake who ever heard of it does also.

## Prospecting for Folk Songs

THE ADVENTURES OF A BALLAD HUNTER. By John A. Lomax. New York: Macmillan & Co. 1947. 302 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by ALBERT N. WILLIAMS

IN THE list of labors of love, the lifetime of effort by John Lomax, later joined by his son Alan, in collecting and preserving native folk ballads, will stand well forward. John Lomax came upon the scene during the twilight days of this once lusty form of expression, just as radio was beginning to replace play-parties and barn dances with the hit-of-the-week directly from Hollywood and New York. Fearful for the fast forgetting of the old songs, he procured some complex recording equipment, which he mounted in the back of an old Ford, and spent the better part of two decades rattling through prison camps, revival meetings, mass baptisms, county fairs, weddings, and funerals, up and down the back counties, collecting scraps of old tunes, half-remembered words, and rare versions of the standard ballads.

Thousands of these recordings now repose in the Library of Congress, where they are finally preserved from the certain loss that Lomax foresaw. From this vast collection he has earlier selected the better known items and arranged three anthologies, "Cowboy

Songs & Other Frontier Ballads," "American Ballads and Folk Songs," and "Our Singing Country."

This newest book of Mr. Lomax's, while it contains the words of a number of songs, is not another collection. It is the story of his life of song prospecting. It is an interesting book in many ways beyond the actual story itself. In this day when men and women of accomplishment in so many fields are "telling" their biographies to collaborators, or having them ghosted for magazine publication, readers have become slightly dazed by the uniformly high style of intensely personal narratives. The disadvantage of this consistency of style is that all these biographies tend to sound the same, and the one distinguishing facet becomes clouded—the individual's personality.

Happily, Mr. Lomax did not take a stylist to his bosom. He merely set down the story of his search as he would tell it, and as he has told portions of it, to delighted audiences all over the United States. He describes the many disappointments he has had to digest at the hands of unsympathetic persons who hindered his activities for the simple fact that they saw no reason in his pursuit. Prison wardens, poor farm managers, plantation overseers, stewards of some of the most important cultural legacies

this country has ever had, yet they accepted Mr. Lomax and his recording devices with reluctance, and gave him only the most cursory assistance.

On the other hand, in practically every case the folk themselves, the men and women who knew the songs, and to whom the songs were the only means of personality expression of any sort, gave Mr. Lomax every possible aid. In most cases they did not understand the purpose of either the collecting or the machinery concerned. The elaborate recording device frightened them, puzzled them, and gave them stage-fright. However, with a patience that is rare to the average person, and found only in true scholars and artists, Mr. Lomax coaxed them out of their shyness and their fear, and managed to reach deep down in their memories for songs that had already passed beyond the borders of extinction.

In most instances the singers rose

to the occasion to guarantee a token of immortality for themselves.

But beyond the personal handicaps which Mr. Lomax encountered at the hands of unsympathetic individuals, there was the lack of interest in American folk material that characterized publishing houses, universities, and private foundations. Only through years of patient research did he bring to these people enough material to convince them of the need for funds to pursue his vocation on a sound professional basis. Luckily, the importance of his work was at last recognized, and he was given adequate support. Today, the magnificent collection of recordings that he has deposited in The Library of Congress, which are at the disposal of writers, musicians, and scholars, represent a life's work of the first magnitude. This book is a genuinely moving apostrophe to that collection, and will be a valuable addition to any library of Americana.

## The Clock and the Miracle

THE AGE OF ANXIETY. By W. H. Auden. New York: Random House. 1947. 138 pp. \$2.50.

By Kathleen Sutton

AUDEN'S "baroque eclogue" of Quant, Malin, Rosetta, and Emble on All Souls' Night presents the paradox of human existence, at once in time and in eternity, and the dilemma expressed by Malin in the epilogue:

We're quite in the dark: we do not  
Know the connection between  
The clock we are bound to obey  
And the miracle we must not despair of.

The prologue, in a Third Avenue bar any autumn of the late war, turns on the refrain: "Many have perished; more will." The four speakers then move, from specific space and time, into a colloquy on the seven ages of man. Their several reminiscences merge into history and pre-history, punctuated by radio and juke box. Reminiscence, inner time, transforms next to a timeless fantasy world, an allegory shared by the four alcohol-released participants. The ancient allegory of pilgrimage in search of lost Eden travels now by dream-plane, train, trolley-car, bicycle, canoe, through real country and city become unreal, turned to wasteland, and returned to inescapable place and time. The Dantean road by way of mountain and wood leads to a hell and purgatory of terror in the familiar scene. The way on, however, is not to the rose of light but back to the world.

This return invokes several commentaries. A Dirge, in chorus, laments the "lost dad," the human leader who solves all mortal trouble. Next, the Masque, the almost but not successful love, will not, after all, create the "happy future." The epilogue offers further alternatives, Quant's cheery agnosticism and Malin's faith that:

It is where we are wounded that is  
when He speaks  
Our creaturely cry, concluding His  
children  
In their mad unbelief to have mercy  
on them all



W. H. Auden's 'imagination is not that of a dramatic poet . . . [his] figures are ideas, not whole persons.'

As they wait unawares for His World to come.

The rendering in alliterative verse is effective, seldom troubled by the Swinburnean accident of comic tone in serious context. Malin, of the four speakers, is most nearly a developed character. Quant and Rosetta are somewhat more individual than Emble. Emble's youth may excuse this uncertain quality; his speeches could occasionally, lacking the tag, be attributed to any other of the three characters. But his final portrait, given by Rosetta, is not consonant with characteristics suggested in several of his earlier appearances. The Dirge and the Masque, which allow most scope to Auden's inimitable gift for jesting-in-earnest and his wry wit of language, are, with the prologue and the last speeches of Rosetta and Malin, the high points of penetration and craftsmanship.

This newest work is a distinct advance beyond "The Sea and The Mirror" and "For the Time Being," to both of which it is related by themes and method. Some current appraisals of Auden to the contrary, his imagination is not that of a dramatic poet. He is a superb rhetorician, but he neither creates character nor sets up dramatic action. His figures are devices to express effective meditation. This characteristic is most marked in his present work. Though the final speeches of Rosetta and Malin are memorable poetry, preparation for Malin's valedictory has been slight; and, for Rosetta's surging irony in lamentation, the reader has scarcely been prepared at all. Auden's figures are ideas, not whole persons.

This in no way impugns Auden's deservedly distinguished position in English poetry; it suggests only that his incursions, since the early thirties, into semi-dramatic forms tend to disperse his major powers. "The Age of Anxiety" is the more successful precisely because it is an eclogue, a form germane to Ideas talking.

## Prestige

By Kathleen Sutton

ALL ignorant of the human brain  
Bent on its lofty enterprise,  
The ant, with self-approving eyes,

Masters his own precise domain.

Efficiently, with due aplomb,  
He builds great shelters out of sand,  
And undertakes, as heaven planned,  
Economies of seed and crumb.

Thus occupied, by work and wit  
He boldly shapes his universe,  
And dies no better or no worse  
Than had an atom never split.

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