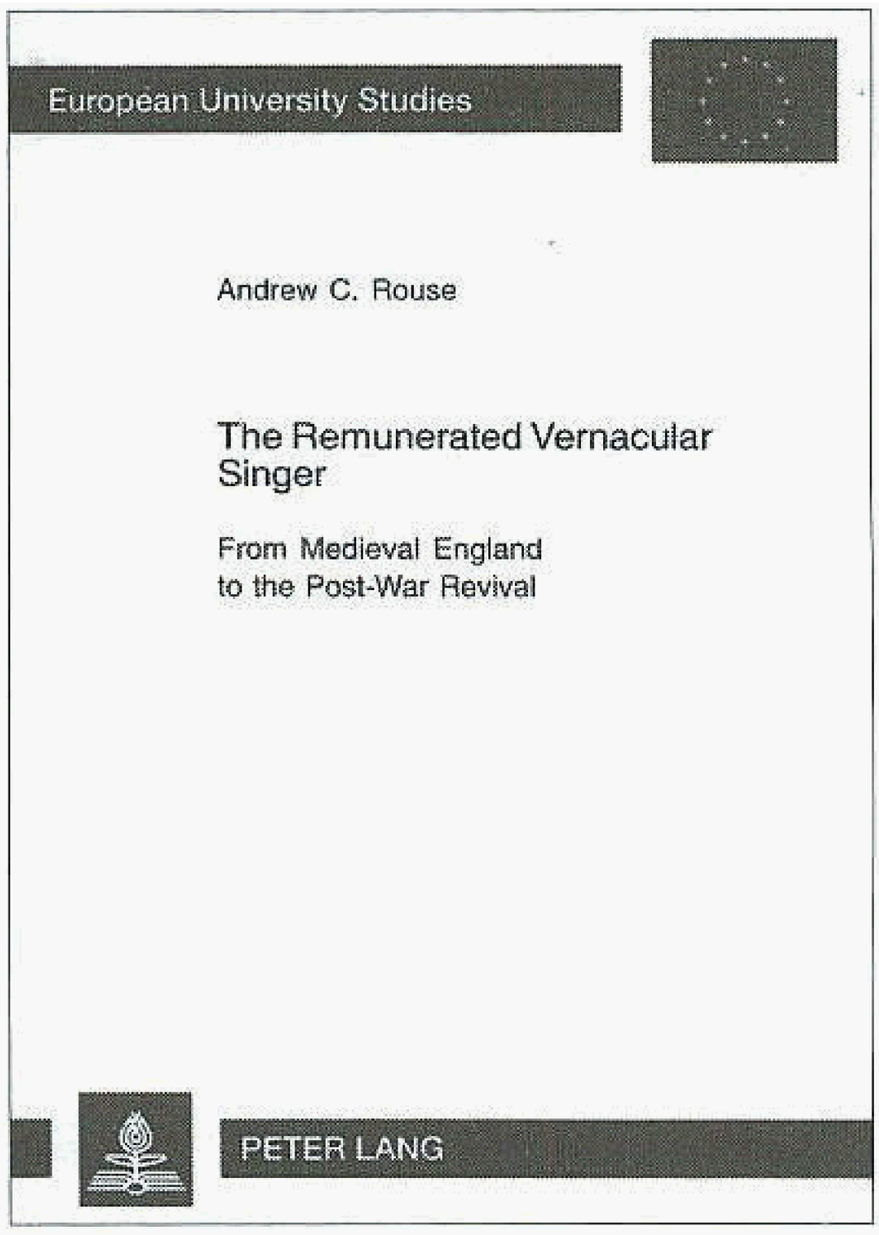
The Remunerated Vernacular Singer: From'Medieval England to the.Post-War Revival

Andrew C. Rouse. European University Studies, Series XIV, Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature, Vol. 45. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005. 212 pp.
Illus. Bibliog. Discog. Appendixes.
ISBN 3-631-53305-5. ISSN 0721-3387. £25.50/€36.40.

This short book tackles the history of an obscure and complex phenomenon over a very long time span. Perhaps inevitably it raises more questions than it answers. Its roots in a Hungarian doctoral thesis – and, earlier, a variety of papers the author has delivered at various conferences over the past ten years – remain a little too obvious; more reworking was required to transform the disparate elements into a coherent whole. Although in places there is heavy reliance on rather well-known secondary sources, it is a scholarly work, and those of us who mourn the passing of the genuine footnote (that is, those conveniently located at the bottom of the page) will be pleased to see that Rouse's European publisher has allowed him that luxury (they may also be amused at his anarchistic approach to citation style).



The quality and originality of the treatment varies considerably from chapter to chapter, which is hardly surprising since few academics nowadays would pretend to the breadth of expertise necessary to write with authority on the entire span of English cultural history from the pre-Roman era to the eve of the twenty-first century. In this respect Rouse is a refreshing maverick, and his book is welcome because it challenges us to think in terms of the *longue durée*. Yet how successfully he himself has met the challenge is debatable. There are many interesting ideas and analyses here, but, paradoxically, it is usually when Rouse wanders off topic, which he not infrequently does, that he is most thoughtful and informative.

The first chapter – which covers the Neolithic era to the collapse of Roman Britain – is framed in terms of a critique of Bruno Nettl's textbook *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents* and Alan Lomax's *Folk Song Style and Culture*. Rouse's perspective appears to derive mainly from the eminent Hungarian musicologist László Vikár, and he questions whether the English (or Welsh or Irish) bard's social status differed radically from that of the Gambian *griot* or the Hungarian Gypsy. His answer is neither categorical nor conclusive, but he seems to be suggesting that the earliest English vernacular singers were professional musicians who were highly regarded by peasants and chieftains alike. But, in contrast to the fate of the musician in West African or Eastern European countries, for the English bard it has been downhill ever since, at least until the 1960s.

The thrust of Rouse's chapter on the Middle Ages – a period regrettably left undefined – is to discover what can be adduced about the itinerant minstrel from the Child ballads, which he assumes to be predominantly medieval in origin. This seems to me a largely unwarranted assumption since the number of Child ballads that we can firmly date back to earlier than 1500 can be counted on one hand, but Rouse's argument is nonetheless an intriguing one. He draws a sharp distinction between the Robin Hood ballads and the rest; the Robin Hood corpus, he suggests, is aimed at the middling strata of society (non-aristocratic, but non-peasant too), whereas most of the rest were produced within and for the nobility. This implies that there were two kinds of medieval minstrel: those with patrons at court or among the landed gentry in the countryside; and those who made a living entertaining the middle classes. This seems plausible, and although the premises are faulty the conclusion may nonetheless be true. But we are still a long way from the definitive study of the medieval minstrel that we need.

For Rouse, as for Ritson and many others, the sixteenth century was a time of precipitous decline in the status of the minstrel. He points to two main factors: the dissolution of the monasteries, which produced a flood of unemployed ex-clerics, too many of whom became itinerant singers; and the invention of the printing press, which made possible the broadside ballad. Minstrels were suddenly de trop, and, in accordance with the law of supply and demand, the payments they received for their services plummeted in real terms, once the high rate of inflation in Tudor England is taken into account. Surprisingly, Rouse largely skips over the seventeenth century; the expected chapter is missing, and his evidence on the material status of the ballad seller/singer in the eighteenth century is largely limited to Hogarth's engravings, which portray street musicians and ballad sellers as the dregs of urban society. The thesis of the last part of the book appears to be that the ballad, having gradually gone 'underground' in early modern England, due to its capture by the broadside industry and the declining status of the ballad singer employed by that industry, resurfaced after the Second World War thanks to a politically motivated folk song revival led by Lloyd and MacColl. This interpretation of the post-war revival seriously underestimates its non-political side (as well as musical roots in blues and hillbilly music, courtesy of Lead Belly, Guthrie, Lomax, and Lonnie Donegan), and ignores its continuity with the late Victorian and Edwardian revival. Nonetheless, there *is* a sense in which Anne Briggs, Martin Carthy, and Shirley Collins were successors to a long line of poorly remunerated ballad singers from the sixteenth century onwards.

Chapters 5 (on 'Maritime and Military Matters') and 6 (on 'The Factory Lass, the Serving Maid, and the Farm Labourer') were for me the most interesting and substantive of the book. They are primarily discussions of what the content of broadsides and other printed songs can tell us about the five social groups mentioned in the chapter titles. Although well worth reading, they are not unproblematic. For example, the former skips rather cavalierly from century to century, so that at one moment we are with Queen Elizabeth addressing her sailors at Tilbury on the eve of the Armada, and the next we are plunged into the Napoleonic Wars with a line-by-line deconstruction of the ballad of 'A King or a Consul'. Still, Rouse has some good points to make; for example, I agree wholeheartedly with his suggestion that the cultural preferences of domestic

servants are an important topic that should be rescued from neglect. Yet I was puzzled by the lack of direct relevance of these chapters to the central theme of the book. They added virtually nothing to our knowledge of the singers and their professional status (or lack of it). And where was the discussion of Tom D'Urfey and his contemporaries, the analysis of the role of the eighteenth-century pleasure gardens, or the examination of the relationship of ballad operas to folk songs and 'national' songs? Rouse jumps from Hogarth to Mayhew for evidence that the financial and social status of the ballad seller/singer did not improve much with the Industrial Revolution. But were the hawkers of broadsides the only remunerated vernacular singers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England? I think not, and I suspect that Rouse became trapped in a narrow definition of vernacular song that limited the breadth of his vision. It is perhaps unfair to conclude by suggesting that an author should have written a different kind of book, but I can't help feeling that he would have done better to forget the Stone Age, the Middle Ages, and the Post-war Revival, and to have studied instead the fortunes of a wider ranger of popular musicians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

E. DAVID GREGORY
Athabasca University, Canada

The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies

Edited by Thomas A. McKean. A Project of the Kommission für Volksdichtung and the Elphinstone Institute. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2003. 388pp. Indexes. ISBN 0-87421-568-4. US$21.95
(£20.00 from Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen).

I am extremely glad to have the opportunity to review this fascinating collection of papers, which have their origins in the 1999 International Ballad Conference of the Kommission für Volksdichtung. As a non-academic, I found the whole book very readable and the very titles of many of the papers made my mouth water. I was surprised and delighted to find that many of them touched on topics I am currently researching – the influence of antiquarians on ballad dissemination, and the nature of ballad migration across language barriers, for example. McKean ties up the twenty-six papers into five neat bundles each introduced by a concise and scholarly summary. I particularly like the way he states both sides of the case where controversy and contradictory theses exist; for example, he stresses the importance of analogy in cross-cultural ballad themes, but also points out that these are sometimes so superficial that they don't indicate a real analogy (p. 171).

More than half of the papers cover English-language ballads or collectors, with French and Flemish two each, leaving one apiece for Italian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Danish, Slovenian, Scots Gaelic, Norn (Nordic Orkney/Shetland), and a paper on a ballad that migrated from French to German to Portuguese. The first seven deal with particular themes in balladry, from Del Giudice's hypnotizing discourse on 'Ballad Therapy' and