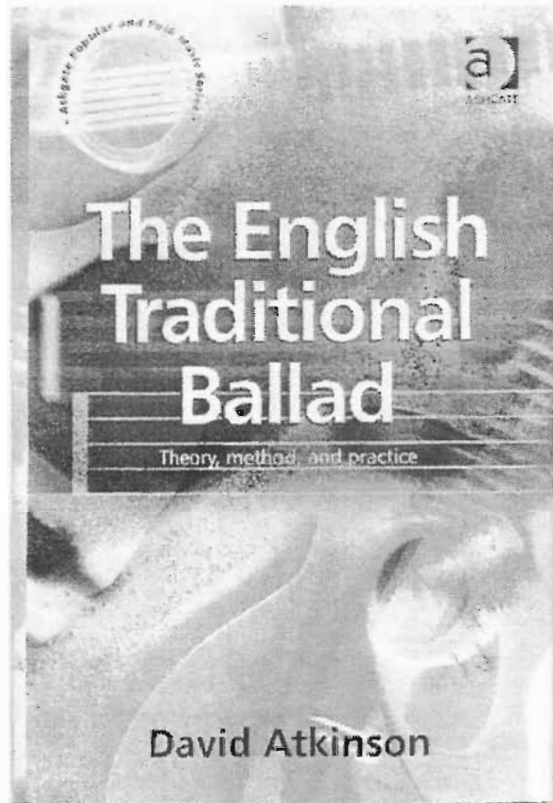


Two Seminal New Books: *The English Traditional Ballad* & *Rainbow Quest*

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Atkinson, David. *The English Traditional Ballad: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashcroft, 2002.



I know of no better work on traditional balladry than this. Atkinson is a thoughtful, perceptive, and very knowledgeable ballad scholar. His book is not easy to read from cover to cover in one sitting, but rather one that repays frequent revisits to savour the many words of wisdom within its pages. Just as when a given ballad becomes the topic of conversation one is inclined to run to Child or Bronson to check out the alternative variants, so I can see that I will be frequently referring to Atkinson to see what he has to say about a particular ballad cluster or theme.

When I first came across this book I hoped that it would prove to be a suitable text for teaching undergraduate history students about the ballad tradition. It is not — it is too dense and erudite, and its method of organization is not chronological —

but it should be a godsend to graduate students in folklore or cultural studies. The first chapter, “Introduction: accessing ballad tradition” provides a sophisticated survey of the history of ballad studies, and a commentary on some of the most recent debates about the nature of folk traditions. Atkinson himself offers a concept of “traditional referentiality” as a methodology for “harnessing something of the synergy of versions and types, and the depth in time and space that provide part of the continuing compulsion” to listen again and again to what Bert Lloyd called “the big ballads”. He attempts to explain (albeit in rather abstract terms) what he means by this approach in the final pages of the introduction but the rest of the book provides a better explanation, by means of illustration and example. It repeatedly explores the fluid relationship between specific performances of ballads by individual singers in certain geographical locales and the broader traditions of which those performances are part.

Atkinson is particularly interested in the question of whether there can legitimately be said to be an English ballad tradition. His ultimate answer is a qualified “yes”, and one of the joys of his book is how he persuades us that he is right. Although he knows his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* from back to front, this is not just a scholarly analysis of ballad texts but rather an exploration of how those ballads are (or have recently been) sung in different parts of England. Atkinson includes not only the best bibliography of primary and secondary sources for the study of the English ballad that I have ever seen but also a discography that leaves one slaving at the mouth. I didn’t need convincing that traditional song was not yet dead in the British Isles but here is plenty of evidence for anyone who doubted the persistence of traditional English culture in the face of multiculturalism and globalization. Of course, the kind of Englishness represented by Atkinson’s ballad singers is now a distinctly minority tradition, and one does fear that it may eventually be snuffed out, but in the meantime the much-to-be applauded labours of Veteran Records and Musical Traditions go on.

The main body of *The English Traditional Ballad* comprises five chapters that treat different ballad

clusters or types. The first of these focuses on revenant and riddle ballads, with the lover's tasks in 'The Unquiet Grave' the centrepiece of the analysis. A chapter on comic ballads about sexual adventures and about married life provides some light relief before an exploration of the themes of incest, soricide and fratricide, centred on "The Rich Man's Daughter", "The Cruel Brother" and "Edward". Atkinson sees these ballad-clusters as closely related, and often linked by an underlying motif of sexual jealousy. He is particularly interested in comparing traditional singers' explanations of their protagonists' motives for their dire and deadly deeds with interpretations suggested by ballad scholars.

He continues this focus in the next chapter, titled 'Motivation, gender, and talking birds' which begins with a discussion of "The Broomfield Hill" and continues with "Young Hunting" and "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight". Are these ballads early and covert expressions of feminism in a patriarchal society? Atkinson's answer is only a qualified yes, but he recognises that the meaning of ballads changes according to the singer and her social situation:

While it is attractive that the heroines of [these three] ballads are resourceful, self-reliant, and even subversive women...it seems that there is a point at which they do have to conform, or at least keep their knowledge to themselves. If the parrot of 'The Outlandish Knight'...is allowed to stand for the ballad heroine, then she, too, is caged in her father's house, just as patriarchy at large, in its many manifestations and degrees, 'colonises' women. Ballads are, perhaps inevitably, assimilated to some of the deepest structures and assumptions of the societies that made them and sang (and sing) them, and in turn they reproduce, and in some degree reinforce, those structures and assumptions as part of the 'habitus' of ballad singing. Moreover, at times, these things are so profoundly woven into ballad narratives that the immediate impression is rather of a 'gap' or absence of motivation. The ballad way of telling stories seems especially well adapted to this dynamic between artistic expression and social environment. The resulting impression is one of strictly limited realism, an underlying verisimilitude but a 'magical' freedom at the narrative level...The social context within the text of 'The Outlandish Knight' provides not just a mirror of ideology but a focus for negotiation, which is in turn necessarily sited within the social context in which the ballad is heard. So the 'magic' of the ballads becomes the aesthetic ground for a praxis in which meanings can be constantly negotiated; and

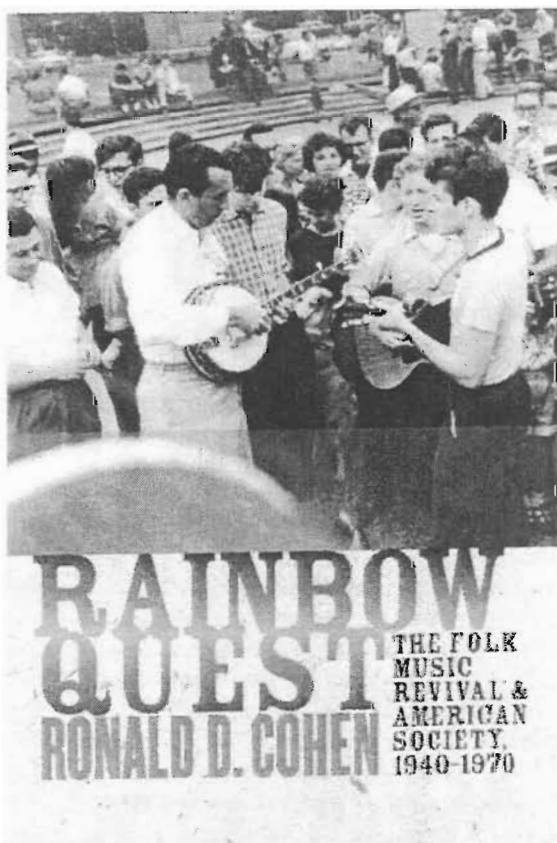
because of traditional referentiality — and because songs and performances have become preserved in printed, manuscript and recorded sources — these negotiations can also take place dynamically across time and space. [pp. 179-180]

Another theme that particularly interests Atkinson is that of the tension between the stable and seemingly unchangeable social order portrayed in traditional balladry and the glimpses of threatening disorder that many texts nonetheless reveal. The last of his chapters devoted to analysing specific ballad-clusters explores this idea, with especial reference to murder and punishment; it is titled 'Magical corpses and the discovery of murder' and includes discussions of (among others) murdered-sweetheart ballads such as "The Downfall of William Grismond", "The Cruel Ship's Carpenter", "The Oxfordshire Tragedy", "Sir Hugh" and "The Two Sisters". Atkinson's conclusion is interesting. He argues that on one level the recurrent theme that *murder will out* (thanks to supernatural intervention, if necessary) served the social function of imposing a conventional pattern on events that were potentially highly disturbing and disruptive of social order. But he also finds a Bakhtinian sub-text operating in opposition to official, elite, ideology, a kind of carnivalesque delight in crime that provides a vicarious sense of release from the demands and impositions of authority. In this tension between text and sub-text Atkinson sees the room for negotiation exploited by every singer seeking to express his or her own interpretation of the ballad's meaning. Ballad singers, he argues, necessarily work within a framework of 'traditional referentiality' but that framework is often ambiguous and multivalent, allowing them plenty of scope to make their songs their own.

Paradoxically, although Atkinson's style and approach to his subject often seem very academic, his analyses of ballad texts, by showing dimensions (and contemporary relevance) that I had previously missed, have made various traditional songs live again for me. So although this is not the easiest of books to read (or, sometimes, to understand) it does repay the effort. Highly recommended.

Cohen, Ronald D. *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970*. Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

In contrast to the dearth of good material on the English and Canadian folksong revivals, there is already a huge number of works on the post-war American revival: biographies, autobiographies, reminiscences, collections of essays, collections of primary documents, articles, and doctoral dissertations. One hardly knows where to begin in approaching such a splendid array of printed matter. A book such as *Rainbow Quest*, which attempts to make sense of it all by providing a synthesis of the literature and an overview of the roots and evolution of this significant cultural phenomenon, is therefore very welcome. It is not an easy task to accomplish well. Others before Cohen have tried and, in the main, failed. The most recent attempt was Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996). Cantwell chose to write a series of reflective essays on various aspects of the revival, but his book provided relatively little new factual information, and it seemed curiously selective in its emphases. While useful and sometimes insightful, it was hardly the definitive history for which we have so long been waiting.



Cohen's alternative survey is moderate in length (290 pages, plus preface, endnotes and index). The book has many virtues, although, surprisingly, it

lacks either bibliography or discography. It is thorough, informative, well documented, and even-handed in its coverage of those aspects of the American revival on which its author chooses to focus. However, as an overview of the entire movement it has some weaknesses. Cohen does not go back far enough in his search for the roots of the revival. He is good on the work of such American pioneers as Carl Sandburg and John Lomax, but he needed to look further back than the twenties and further afield than the USA.

The post-war American revival was one of several branches from a stem rooted in the British Isles. If you analyze Joan Baez's early material, for example, you will find that she mainly sang a mixture of traditional ballads and folk-lyrics. The ballads were mainly selected from those collected from English and Scottish sources during the Victorian era by Harvard professor Francis James Child. The folk-lyrics were often songs collected in the Southern Appalachians by English folklorists Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, or by their successors working for the Library of Congress. Many of the topical folksongs written during the fifties and sixties (including several of Bob Dylan's) used melodies that derived from traditional song. And the resurgence of traditional music – unaccompanied ballad singing, fiddle playing, rebel songs, Celtic stylings – was a major dimension of the revival, indeed the foundation that underlay both protest song and the commercial folk boom. Equally important was the way in which a whole gamut of singer-songwriters developed traditional forms in their search for self-expression. Cohen minimizes and neglects these important dimensions of the movement. His version of its history is largely restricted to topical song and to the rise and fall of such big names as the Weavers, the Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul and Mary, Baez, and Dylan.

The people strikingly absent from *Rainbow Quest* are thus the collectors and scholars, and, perhaps even more surprisingly, many of the other singers who played significant roles in the revival. To be sure, a fair number of artists – country bluesmen, urban bluesmen, 'old timey' musicians, bluegrass pickers, and a few singer-songwriters – do get brief mention, but their work receives no concerted analysis. One looks in vain for recognition of the important roles played in the fifties by such figures as Buell Kazee, Bascomb Lamar Lunsford, Susan Reed, and Cynthia Gooding, or in the sixties by Eric Anderson, Judy Collins, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, and Jean Ritchie (among others). Why is this? In part it is a matter of space. By

choosing to give the floor to administrators and journalists, Cohen left too few pages available to do full justice to the many talented singers and instrumentalists. But the explanation goes beyond this. The truth is that Cohen seems not very interested in the *music*. Only one song, "Tom Dooley", receives any substantive analysis, and none are quoted. There are no musical examples. Nor is there ever any discussion of musical styles, except for Dylan's return to his rock 'n' roll roots. In short, the music gets short shrift in *Rainbow Quest*, and so does the poetry in the lyrics. It is as if Woody Guthrie never composed "Deportees", Pete Seeger "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" Dylan "Desolation Row", Joni Mitchell "Woodstock", and Baez never recorded "La Colombe (The Dove)" or Judy Collins the "Marat/Sade".

Rainbow Quest is therefore not a survey of the entire American folk music revival. Notwithstanding the book's subtitle, it is essentially an *institutional* history, covering the years 1945 to 1967. The focus is on organizations and on the people who founded and ran them. The reader is treated to a great deal of fascinating data on clubs, coffee houses, stores, magazines, and festivals, much of it culled by Cohen from interviews conducted with participants or from the papers left behind by others. For example, we follow the troubled history of the *People's Songs* cooperative and its successor, the *People's Artists* booking agency. The changing editorial perspective of *Sing Out*, managed for most of its early life by Irwin Silber, is analyzed. The varying fortunes of several folk festivals, including Berkeley and Newport, are chronicled. The evolving viewpoint of Izzy Young, proprietor of the Folklore Center (a Greenwich Village music store) is traced over a ten year period (1957-67), using Young's diary and his semi-regular "Frets and Frails" column in *Sing Out*.

Cohen has amassed a large body of hitherto mainly unused primary source material, and he quotes from it extensively, thereby recreating a first-hand feel for the ongoing debates and controversies within the movement over such issues as authenticity, protest song, commercialism, and the very nature of 'folk music' itself. There is a noticeable striving for racial equality in the coverage: one of Cohen's frequently quoted activists is Julius Lester, and, as might be expected, considerable space is given to the reciprocal interaction between the Civil Rights movement and the folk boom. Another striking virtue of the book is the fairly systematic attempt at geographical evenhandedness. This is not just a history of the New York scene. Cohen makes a

concerted attempt to follow also events on the East Coast (Boston/Cambridge), the mid-West (Chicago, primarily), and the West Coast (L.A./San Francisco). On the other hand, the focus is almost entirely on the big cities, and the important Asheville festival, for example, receives only a few brief remarks.

Although this is in no sense a polemical work – indeed its accurate and balanced documenting of different opinions on divisive issues is one of its virtues – Cohen's preferences (and his politics) can be read between the lines. For example, he has little sympathy for Bascomb Lamar Lunsford's anti-communism or for Burl Ives' repudiation of his leftist connections. His heroes are Guy Carawan, Izzy Young, and Julius Lester, and he is willing to print without negative comment the latter's scathing and mean-spirited attack on Baez (a dedicated campaigner for racial equality and against the Vietnam war) as a good-looking white "bitch" whose only trials were "deciding whether she should fly first-class or tourist" (p. 207). He judges the revival to be in decline after 1966 because the commercial boom began to wane and politically engaged singers turned away from civil rights to the anti-war movement. This view undervalues the wealth of contemporary folksong created in the late sixties and early seventies, as well as neglecting the resurgence of traditional music that fueled the Celtic revival.

When all is said and done, an overall judgement of *Rainbow Quest* must somehow balance what is excellent and original in the book against its rather wilful failures. It is difficult to understand why Cohen, an excellent historian, would not want to put the revival into a broader historical context, both European and American. The importance of traditional music in the revival is hardly arguable, so it seems odd that such a major dimension of the subject would be so systematically ignored. It is equally puzzling why an obviously industrious and professional scholar would omit a bibliography and discography. The book is so good in so many ways that I find it particularly frustrating that, for these reasons, I cannot recommend it wholeheartedly. We are still waiting for a definitive account of the American revival that will not only achieve a reasonable balance between the political and the traditional wings of the movement but will also carefully examine the interplay between the two. But, yes, *Rainbow Quest* is now the best book available on the subject. If you are interested in the history of folk music in the USA you must read it.