

Sheldon POSEN, *For Singing and Dancing and ail Sorts of Fun* (Toronto: Deneau, 1988. vxiii + 144 pp. Appendices, index, bibliography, discography, photos. ISBN 0-88879-178-X. \$ 9.95)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

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I approached the review of this book with some misgivings—not about the book itself, nor the author, but about my ability to deal with the conflict of interest which is unavoidable in Canadian folklore scholarship. Our academic world is an exceedingly small one, and most Canadian folklorists view each other as more than distant academic colleagues. Shelley Posen has been my good friend and sometime collaborator for almost two decades—and now I must try to judge his work in the same way as I would the book of a stranger.

I will not inflict upon the reader some self-deceiving pseudo-objectivity. I read this book, knowing the history of its author as well as the evolution of his study (he thanks me twice in the acknowledgements). As I read Shelley's book, I was more than the disinterested scholar; I was a cheering section, ready to applaud every thrust and parry of the author's argument, ready as well to groan in sympathy with every lapse of scholarly rigour. Luckily for both the author and me, I had plenty to cheer about and little cause to groan.

There is a subtitle to this study which appears on the front cover rather than the title page: "The Story of the Ottawa Valley's Most Famous Song *The Chapeau Boys*"; Shelley's study is an experiment in folksong scholarship in which a particular song is the focus of analysis. *The Chapeau Boys* is a logging song written by Patrick Gregg (the one who lived down by the river in the house which is now Ned Sullivan's). But it is more than simply a logging song, since for a variety of reasons, *The Chapeau Boys* has become an anthem for the Quebec town of Chapeau and a shibboleth for those who live in or near the Ottawa Valley.

I label this work an "experiment" because it is perhaps the only book-length study of its kind in which the concern of the author is a particular song, rather than a singer, a folksong genre or a repertoire. Of course, there have been many comparativist studies of specific texts, but Shelley's aim is not primarily historic-geographic. As well, there have been good article-length treatments of specific songs—the

work of Sandy Ives comes to mind. Some folksongs and epics have been treated extensively as anthems—Romania's *Miorita* and the epic *Kalevala* of the Finns are two—but the notion of a regional, rather than national, anthem is one which has not received the attention it deserves.

Shelley has taken a song which has had the same lasting impact upon its community as *Squid Jiggin's Ground* has had in Newfoundland or *Un Canadien errant* in Quebec; but *The Chapeau Boys* is an even more local phenomenon than these provincial anthems. *The Chapeau Boys* is especially similar to *Squid Jiggin' Ground* in that it describes a traditional occupation (logging), but like the Newfoundland song, its description is not of the work involved but of the good times and pleasant memories which make logging, fishing and other such occupations part of the nostalgic folklore of certain regions and peoples. Like the Newfoundland anthem, *The Chapeau Boys* has transcended its expected role as a regional folksong to become, in the author's words, an "icon".

This book, then, is an analysis of why this particular song has become an icon. Shelley explores the history of the song and its disputed authorship; who performs it and how it varies from one performance to the next; how it fits into the regional repertoire of the Ottawa Valley (and how it is markedly different from other songs); and ultimately, the hows, whys and wherefores of *The Chapeau Boys'* status as icon and anthem. In the course of this exploration, we learn much about the region and its people, the occupation of logging, the diversion of singing, the historical and social changes which the area has undergone—in short, the author provides a description of the rich context in which this song has flourished.

Shelley's experiment succeeds. This study reveals a new way of approaching the subject of folksong (or indeed of folk texts of any kind) which promises to be as important to the discipline as performer-audience analyses, contextual studies or functional approaches. Shelley has re-introduced the text as an item of analysis in folklore, not as an isolated literary work, but as an integral part of the creative culture of a community. By building upon the work of functionalists, contextualists and behaviourists, Shelley has breathed new life into textual analysis.

Thus, the reader is first introduced to the song, not as a performance, but as an allusion in an auctioneer's cant, later as an in-joke among patrons of one of Chapeau's pubs, where only the first line is sung, and in another instance, as a complete text sung to an ailing singer by another singer who, in other contexts, disliked performing

The Chapeau Boys. In this book, the reader sees a song, not only as a performed text, but as a part of the shared knowledge of the community, as a metaphorical statement of local identity, and as a barometer of the economic and social health of the community. Just as the late D. K. Wilgus expanded upon Kittredge's statement, "the text is the thing" (*JAF* 86[1973]: 241-252), Shelley has placed this controversial idea within the mainstream of modern folklore scholarship.

Whenever I had a question about the *The Chapeau Boys*, the author was sure to answer it; he leaves few, if any, folkloristic stones unturned in his analysis. Of course, the sign of a good study is that it leaves the reader with further questions upon which to ponder. I was especially intrigued by the problem Posen poses (supposing Posen does) of why the finest singers in Chapeau do not like to sing this song. The interplay of "specialist" and non-specialist, community insider and outsider, as well as the role which different people in a community play in expressing what the community holds important and what it deems necessary to explain both to itself and to outsiders, is at the crux of this particular problem of active and inactive repertoire.

Yet the value of this book lies beyond the fact that the author has been thorough. He has also been interesting. Shelley did not parachute into this community; he lived there for over a year. He included himself in his analysis of community performance (although he neglects to include the name of a certain bearded guitarist in one of the book's photographs), and his field-note style of interpreting his own role within the culture of Chapeau works well. He conveys his own excitements to the reader to such an extent that one becomes a participant observer in Shelley's struggle to understand *The Chapeau Boys*. Thus, his long section on the song's authorship—a topic which is perhaps incidental to the main thrust of the book, since Patrick Gregg is certainly the *accepted* author among Chapeau's citizens—is so enlivened by the author's enthusiasm and delight in exploring and solving this particular mystery, that one forgives the author such a long aside. In other words, the book is a good read. It has style as well as content.

After reading the book, I was convinced that—were I to teach a course in folksong again—I would add Shelley's study to the required reading list of *Folksongs and Their Makers*, *The Singer of Tales*, *A Singer and Her Songs* and *Big Road Blues*. If students cannot both learn something from this book and enjoy reading it, then there is no hope for them.

Have I no criticisms? Yes, but perhaps they should be directed towards the publisher as much as the author. Several space-saving

measures hurt the book. The excellent photographs should have been larger (and I wanted more of them). An added appendix of the complete lyrics to the other important songs in Chapeau would have enhanced the book; the author gives only snippets of songs such as *The Camp at Hoover Lake*, Chapeau Town or *Sheenboro Boys*. No reader wants to rush off to another book to satisfy his or her curiosity or lust for comparison.

As well, the bibliographer in me was not pleased with the offhand manner in which Shelley treats citations. I realize that footnotes and the like take away from the popular readability of such works, but there are ways around this problem without completely abandoning scholarly traditions; for example, from which of Ives's works does the author quote this scholar's thoughts on the importance of the *Family Herald*? In addition, the bibliography does not contain all of the works which the author cites—Ives's *Suthin'* is perhaps the most glaring example.

Considering my close friendship with the author, this positive review is a bit embarrassing; but if the book were a flop—if Shelley's experiment in folksong scholarship had failed—I would have faced more wrenching feelings than a bit of embarrassment. But I would have panned the book, nevertheless, which brings me back to my initial point. Past issues of *Canadian Folklore canadien* show a certain reticence to review major works in Canadian folklore (or books by major Canadian folklorists). Why haven't Fowke and Carpenter's *Explorations in Canadian Folklore*, Labrie's *Précis de transcription de documents d'archives orales* or Thomas's *Les deux traditions*—to name but three that come readily to mind—received the attention which they deserve in the pages of the Association's organ? If the reason is that friends and close colleagues are afraid to judge each other's works, then Canadian folklore has a serious problem which it must overcome.

I do not plead for the kind of objectivity which is impossible among such a small group of scholars. Let the reviews show all the prejudices which are inevitable under these circumstances, but let there be reviews. In my opinion, the only consequence for an author worse than a bad review is to be ignored by one's colleagues.

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(Due to the recent demise of Deneau Publishers, *For Singing and Dancing and All Sorts of Fun* can be obtained only from the author and selected outlets. For books or information, write I. Sheldon Posen, 295 First Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1S 2G7)