

***“The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing” and Other Songs Cowboys Sing.* Guy Logsdon (ed.). (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. xxii + 388)**

George W. Lyon

Volume 17, numéro 2, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087498ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087498ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lyon, G. W. (1995). Compte rendu de [*“The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing” and Other Songs Cowboys Sing.* Guy Logsdon (ed.). (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. xxii + 388)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(2), 168–171.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087498ar>

"The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing" and Other Songs Cowboys Sing. Guy Logsdon (ed.). (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. xxii + 388)

"The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing" and Other Songs Cowboys Sing first appeared in hardback in 1989; it has recently been reissued in paper. This anthology of cowboy songs and poems was a welcome addition to the growing list of cowboy titles when it first appeared, and it remains welcome. As the title indicates, the book attempts to establish a balance in our understanding of the repertoire of this glamorous profession, filling in the dashes and restoring the asterisked verses and, in some cases, presenting items that, if they were collected at all in earlier times, remained in the collector's file cabinet, probably in a red folder. For years, a "family values" portrait of the cowboy dominated our culture while Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were hailed as the kings of our expressive ranges.

Unfortunately, the difficulty of striking this balance is also indicated by the title. Concluding his preface, Logsdon writes, "My purpose in compiling this collection has been to make available a true range of songs that have been—and remain—a significant part of cowboy culture and experience" (p. xx). He seems generally to have succeeded in this, especially since he has wisely referred to "a true range of songs." The choice of title song seems to promise a more generally bawdy collection than he in fact presents. Why "The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing" should have eponymous glory among all the songs Logsdon has collected—both common and rare—isn't clear, although the words certainly do ring out the warning that readers will need to be willing to read X-rated material. Other than that, it doesn't seem that the song is particularly representative; Logsdon's informant's comment on it suggests his own lack of commitment: "That one was just plumb nasty."

Logsdon notes that not all cowboys appreciated bawdry (p. xiv), and that although cowboy poets of both genders continue to create bawdy verse and song (p. xvi), most of this material came from outside the cowboy tradition (p. xv). The point is to develop a balanced view of cowboy poetry, in which the sentimental, epic, and other modes are clearly as important as bawdry (or—as surely applies to some of this material—obscurity). That the same performers may offer both sentiment and bawdry suggests that either the iconoclasm of one, or the emotion of the other—or both—should not be taken at face value.

In fact, while there is obscenity, misogyny, and misanthropy aplenty here, not all of the bawdry Logsdon presents is truly shocking, except for those who maintain a distaste for openness about bodily functions or Anglo-Saxon terminology. In "The Oaks of Jimderia," "Cousin Harry," and the more familiar

"The Boogaboo" (a North American version of "The Foggy, Foggy Dew"), for example, individuals meet for sexual activity that is tender and even personally committed.

Interestingly enough, except for Austin and Alta Fife's work and Hal Cannon's *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*, Logsdon's anthology is virtually the first anthology of cowboy verbal culture since John A. Lomax's *Cowboy Songs* produced by a folklorist, rather than by a retired cowboy or cowboy singer (Cannon 1985; Fife and Fife 1969; Lomax 1957). This does not mean that Logsdon is entirely at arm's length from his subject matter, however. In several ways, it seems to me, he represents cowboy artists as much as he studies them. For example, Logsdon seems to me to be unduly concerned to demonstrate that cowboy poetry is unique, claiming, for example, "...it is probable that no other occupation either produced such an abundance of poets or inspired as many poems" (p. 289). Yet a number of his annotations refer to *Shitty Songs of Sigma Nu*, and he acknowledges that "My Lula Gal" has been shared with fraternity boys (p. 154) and soldiers (p. 156). The debt of cowboy song to the canons of the sea and the logging industry is well known. Logsdon himself quotes Will C. Barnes, one of the first recorded cowboy singers, from a *Saturday Evening Post* article of 1925: "Some of the very best so-called cowboy poetry in existence has been written by college men who knew little or nothing of the real life and work of the ranges" (p. 306). My own collection of Alberta verse suggests that the poetry of housewives and parents may be at least as extensive as that of the cowboys. While the uniqueness of this activity seems to be an important aspect of the mythology surrounding it—and this is a claim one frequently hears made by Canadian cowboy poets—it should not be taken at face value. If nothing else, the achievement of cowboy poets (or any other kind) need not be unique to be valuable.

Similarly, Logsdon supports the claim for a kind of cowboy authenticity that is at best uncertain: "...while the imaginary cowboy became more unreal, generations of *working* cowboys—or real cowboys—have nourished and kept alive their way of life, their work ethic, and their occupational techniques and customs from which the myth emerged" (p. 282). Perhaps, but the "real cowboys" have always been influenced by "imaginary cowboys," in an expression/enactment cycle that goes back as far as the dime novels.

Indeed, one might speak of a contemporary *cowboyism* which defiantly rejects a stereotype even Hollywood no longer offers (the satin-shirted Gene Autry image), but welcomes another sort of mythic stereotype, a contemporary romanticism of the workaday, the quotidian, the salty, and the vulgar, which is in part reflected in Logsdon's provocative title. Each generation of cowboyists needs to prove its right to defend the *truly quotidian*, which it alone seems to have discovered. Thus Logsdon writes that Ina Sires, who lectured on cowboy culture and produced a songbook during the 20s, "...was genuinely a collector of cowboy songs, but she also romanticised of the cowboy [*sic*]" (p. 306). Part of a quotation

from her work he offers as a demonstration of her romanticism suggests an attitude not so far from that Logsdon expresses towards his own collection: "Not all these ballads are beautiful; but all are sincere and reflect as accurately as a mirror, the life of the cowboy." I doubt that Logsdon would claim that all of his songs "reflect the life of the cowboy," but like Sires, he claims to opt for the "truth" side of Keats' truth/beauty equation, and his disparagement of her romanticism is more useful as a statement of his current status than as a description of her role in her contemporary world.

Much of Logsdon's useful concluding essay, "A Singing Cowboy Roundup," is devoted to the questioning of various performers' authenticity or romanticism. In addition to being a songbook and partial ethnography of the cowboy, *Whorehouse Bells* is an account of the changing conceptualization of cowboy verbal culture. There is more to this than the newly found ability to include bawdry. Logsdon frequently acknowledges that his own understanding of the field has grown during his thirty years of work. He notes, for example, that for years he failed to collect "the tradition of poetry recitation" (p. 42), considering it a trivial genre, as was common. By the same token, he confesses that he'd ignored a "...rodeo version of 'The Strawberry Roan.' I was interested only in what I thought to be the 'old' cowboy songs. It was only years later, after I began to conceptualize the true development of cowboy singing, that I returned for Bill Long's version" (p. 97).

It should be noted that the majority of songs Logsdon presents were collected from a single performer, Riley Neal. Indeed, he indicates that the book was at one time conceived of as a study of this major informant. However, Logsdon's work with other sources, both scholarly and in the field, has been extensive. I see no reason to fault him for overgeneralizing from one performer's repertoire.

Logsdon's anthology is valuable for the collection of songs it presents, for his thorough review of the literature and recording history of the field of cowboy song and poetry (including a rather good introduction to the publication history of bawdy song), and because of the author's own open discussion of his development as a student of the field that invites a similar response from his readers. If it's a book that some readers will disagree with frequently, if they find themselves wishing that Logsdon would question some of his own assumptions a bit more, then we should acknowledge that our disagreement is possible because of the author's thoroughness and openness.

References Cited

Cannon, Hal. 1985. *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith.

Fife, Austin E., and Alta S. Fife, eds. 1969. *Cowboy and Western Songs: A Comprehensive Anthology*. New York: Potter.

Lomax, John A. 1957. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. New York: Macmillan.

GEORGE W. LYON
Calgary, Alberta

The Tancook Schooner: An Island and its Boats. Wayne O'Leary.
(Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press,
1994. Pp.xiv + 272)

To date, the historiography of Atlantic Canada's maritime past has focused almost exclusively on the large sailing ship and its place in the "Golden Age of Sail." The economic and social history of these seemingly more alluring and romantic vessels has been the subject of many academic and popular publications. In stark contrast, the ubiquitous traditional small wooden craft, usually defined as less than 50 feet in length, has been largely ignored, despite the constant and integral role it played in the evolution of maritime economies and local ways of life. Be they dories, punts, dinghies, sloops or small schooners, their history has not been adequately recorded. Thankfully this neglect will not be the epithet of the Tancook Schooner. Author Wayne O'Leary has compiled an in-depth perspective of the relationship between the 40- 50- foot schooner and the people of Tancook Island situated in Mahone Bay, southwest of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

As a self-described labour of love, O'Leary spent numerous summer vacations in the 1950s and 60s fishing and sailing the waters of Mahone Bay with uncles and cousins absorbing the family lore of Tancook Island, its people and boats. Realizing this oral tradition would soon disappear in the wake of modernization, he began systematically interviewing family members and those familiar with the island's technological heritage and traditional fishing, farming, and coasting economy. In time, oral history was supplemented by collecting information from half models, sail plans, and photographs, and by more formal research in libraries, museums, and archives.

One of the major strengths of the book is O'Leary's success in presenting the Tancook Schooner as a cultural artifact which assumes greater significance when properly described in the context of this time, place, and use. O'Leary weaves a backdrop of the island's early history and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. Against this, the Tancook is portrayed as the linchpin of the island's economy from its genesis the first decade of the 20th century to its gradual demise