

***The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia.* By Ian McKay.(Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp. 371)**

Diane Tye

Volume 17, numéro 2, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087502ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087502ar>

[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

Tye, D. (1995). Compte rendu de [*The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia.* By Ian McKay.(Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp. 371)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(2), 176–178. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087502ar>

But Kane's unabashed subjectivity has rubbed off on me, and I can only respond in kind.

Kane's scholarship is of a "type," but I don't think that type will be most folklorists' cup of tea (or flagon of mead, perhaps). The value to folklorists of Kane's study lies in its nature, rather than in its thesis. It represents a form of folk revivalism different from, but related to, the variety found at folk festivals or the folkloristic performances of popular culture. There is a New Age feel to this book, and it may well serve as a folkloristic text for the study of new directions in revivalism.

Bibliography

Kane, Alice. 1983. *Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood*, ed. Edith Fowke. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

MICHAEL TAFT
Edmonton, Alberta

The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia. By Ian McKay. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp. 371)

More than any other book I know of, Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk* engendered lively exchange even before its publication. McKay, a historian, is one of Canada's most stimulating scholars and his preliminary papers and articles on the nature and importance of antimodernism to Nova Scotia have excited academics across disciplines. Because the construction of "folk" and the work of folklore collector Helen Creighton are central to McKay's thesis, debate has been particularly spirited among folklorists.

Combining a Neo Marxist perspective with Foucaultian post-structuralism and Gramscian theory, McKay traces the social construction of "the Folk" and "Innocence" as part of a rise of antimodernism in twentieth century Nova Scotia. He argues, "Innocence emerged in the period from 1920 to 1950 as a kind of mythomoteur, a set of fused and elaborated myths that provided Nova Scotians with an overall framework of meaning, a new way of imagining their community, a new core of hegemonic liberal common sense" (p. 30). Divorced from twentieth-century modernity, innocence promoted the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled and the unchanging (p. 30). McKay contends that the embrace of

Innocence brought with it five particularly dramatic changes in perception and practice: the province was portrayed as being essentially Scottish, provincial history focused on a vanished golden age, rockbound coasts and the omnipresent sea became central symbolic landscapes, the archetypal Nova Scotian came to emphasize masculinity and prowess, and, finally, Nova Scotia came to be seen as a "Folk society" (pp. 31–32).

McKay builds his thesis for the creation and success of this variant of antimodernism largely through the presentation of detailed case studies of Helen Creighton, the province's best known folklorist, and Mary Black, a civil servant who promoted handcrafts. He supplements their examples with illustrations from the works of other cultural producers, including regional writers who helped to shape an antimodernist view of the province and its people. He ends his exploration with an examination of contemporary examples of "the folk" as commodified through tourism and commercialism.

It is important to state at the beginning that this is a significant work that every folklorist in Canada should read. That said, it would be a different analysis if written by a folklorist and thus will meet with mixed reaction within the folklore community. I personally find some parts of McKay's discussion more convincing than others. For example, I particularly enjoyed his analysis of contemporary commodification of the folk for commercial and tourism ends. On the other hand, I am less persuaded by some of his statements about Helen Creighton. I assess her place in Canadian folkloristics differently than McKay who imbues her with a significant degree of influence in academic and government circles. And, I suspect other folklorists will find as I did that at times McKay's knowledge of folkloristics and of folklore (and fieldwork) dynamics limited.

Admittedly some of my disagreements with aspects of McKay's interpretation reflect the different filters through which we see the world. As a folklorist whose orientation is feminist, my approach varies from that of McKay, the Neo-Marxist historian. Still, I have some questions about selection. Because we can never consider every example, we must select. Therefore it is not surprising that as McKay critiques the politics and practices of cultural selection he makes his own choices. For example, he relies heavily on the two case studies of Creighton and Black at the expense of other collectors from this time period. Admittedly Creighton was the region's most popular collector, but the work of others from Arthur Huff Fauset and MacEdward Leach to scores of local ethnographers, offer contrasting approaches. And I was struck by the book's real absence of references to those in McKay's own discipline of history. From time to time I wondered about how some of McKay's observations about selection applied to them. I'd like to hear more about their role. What were historians studying during this period? How does the construction of history they were weaving mesh with antimodernism? Finally, the discussion would benefit from more references to what was happening in other places. How does the Nova Scotian example compare to the Appalachian one, for example?

From my own place on the margins of folklore, I see the discipline at a crucial point in its history. Because of this, *The Quest of the Folk* is particularly welcome. Folklorists may not agree with all that McKay says about our field or about a figure like Helen Creighton but he does force us to reflect on our discipline's role in ideologies like antimodernism and to see theory where we once denied its presence. *The Quest of the Folk* comes at an important juncture as we contemplate the changing place of folklore both in Canadian society and in academic life and as we address the uses being made of folklore not only by the people who create and exchange it but by those—including folklorists—who appropriate and commodify it.

DIANE TYE

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Music, Culture, and Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking.

By John Blacking, edited by Reginald Byron. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. xii + 269)

At the time of his death in 1990 at the age of 61, John Blacking was one of the world's pre-eminent ethnomusicologists. Blacking was an exceptionally accomplished and deeply committed scholar/musician/social idealist who indefatigably proselytised on behalf of a universalistic vision of the properties and significance of music in the construction, maintenance and expression of human beingness. From his post as head of the Department of Social Anthropology at the Queen's University of Belfast from 1970 to 1987, he became the principal mentor of a fair number of the scholars currently active in ethnomusicological work. Blacking was a key figure not only in the institutionalisation of ethnomusicology as an academic discipline in Europe but also in the democratisation of access to ethnomusicological training worldwide. He created, as well, a substantial body of highly original and often provocative scholarship.

This volume, as epitomised in the publisher's statement on its back cover, "brings together in one convenient source eight of Blacking's most important theoretical papers along with an extensive introduction by the editor. Drawing heavily on his fieldwork among the Venda people of South Africa, these essays reveal his most important theoretical themes such as the innateness of musical ability, the properties of music as a symbolic or quasi-linguistic system, the complex relationship between music and social institutions, and the relation between scientific musical analysis and cultural understanding."