Ethnologies

ethnologies

David VINCENT, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 19, xii+362 p., bibliography, index, ISBN 0-521-33466-7)

James Moreira

Volume 15, Number 1, 1993

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082562ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1082562ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Moreira, J. (1993). Review of [David VINCENT, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 19, xii+362 p., bibliography, index, ISBN 0-521-33466-7)]. *Ethnologies*, *15*(1), 178–181. https://doi.org/10.7202/1082562ar

> I would like/to tell you something,/my sisters./I am happy,/yes,/as I am coming close/to my final hour/.../this weaving I was blessed with./ I don't want to keep it to myself./I want someone else to learn (p. 197).

We also learn in the Notes that the session was videotaped and that an edited version, entitled "In Memory of Jennie Thlunaut", is available through Nora Dauenhauer. Dauenhauer describes some of the contextual information related to the speeches. Jennie delivered this speech seated on the couch in the living room of Raven House, sitting next to Nora Dauenhauer, who was acting as interpreter. The speech is characterized by a very slow, and sometimes weak delivery — even feeble and fragmented in places (p. 347). The Dauenhauers also include comments on their editorial decision-making: "We have taken some syntactic liberties in English translation in an effort to make some of Jennie's implied connections more explicit. Where significant, these places are indicated in the notes" (p. 347).

Haa Tuwunaagu Yis, For Healing Our Spirit is a wonderful work of love and dedication produced from within the Tlingit community. One can only hope that the Dauenhauers continue with their long-range goal "To collect and transcribe classics of Tlingit oral literature and make them more accessible to students of Tlingit language and culture" (p. 444).

Wendy WICKWIRE
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia

David VINCENT, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 19, xii+362 p., bibliography, index, ISBN 0-521-33466-7).

The interrelationship between print and oral cultures, embracing as it does the two most influential strands of tradition prior to the twentieth century, constitutes a prominent theme within folkloristics. David Vincent's recent study of the impact of literacy on working class culture in nineteenth century England offers a number of valuable contributions to this field of interest, though the work is not without its problems. Its primary objective is to evaluate critically the actual functions of the written word in day to day life. As Vincent states in his introduction, where the abilities of reading and writing are concerned "What

matters is not possession but practice... Literacy will not affect the way individuals think unless they use literacy in order to think. It will not alter their identity unless it is seen to have a specific function in the society in which they live" (p. 18). Over the course of the study, the author demonstrates that while literacy rates rose from around 50% in the late eighteenth century to virtually 100% on the eve of World War I, reading and to an even greater extent writing functioned only within a narrow range of contexts among the working classes.

The historical period covered by the work spans the century and a half in which the industrial revolution and the spread of mass literacy had its greatest impact on working-class culture in England. However, although the title purports to survey the period 1750-1914, the amount of data drawn from the eighteenth century is inconsequential and the bulk of the material falls between the 1830s, which saw early postal and educational reforms, and the 1880s when the effects of late nineteenth century reform of the English school system began to be realized.

Vincent divides the book into six chapters, each exploring the impact of literacy on a particular sector of working class life: the family, education, work, perceptions of the natural world, the imagination, and politics. The comprehensiveness of the work is at once its making and its downfall. On the one hand, the reader is treated to a holistic coverage of the topic, one that contrasts the relative importance of literacy in very specific areas of the cultural experience. On the other hand, he is confronted with a number of difficult generalizations, which are perhaps inevitable in a survey that cuts such a broad swath, both temporally and thematically. In each chapter, the discussion proceeds from the status quo of non- or low-level literacy, through the objectives envisioned by the advocates of mass literacy, and finally to the ends it actually attained, the achievements invariably falling well short of the aspirations. Onus for the failure is distributed broadly to inefficient bureaucracies, the market priorities of the commercial media, and the cultural insularity of the consumers themselves.

Those chapters where the author appears to find himself on solid ground, especially the chapters on work, politics, and education, contain rigorous explorations of the data and are forcefully argued. The chapter on work, the most comprehensive in the book, is particularly stimulating. Broad in scope and thorough in analysis, its exploration of the integration of mass literacy and bureaucracy in the workplace includes a careful consideration of the ongoing relevance of traditional work habits and customs, which are treated as integral features of working culture, not as arcane or redundant practices. Most importantly, Vincent recognizes the complexity of traditional codes of work technique and ethics and their role in sustaining worker pride and self-esteem, and he likewise acknowledges that bureaucracies and codified work regimens often undermined and dehumanized this system. Further, he shows that where literacy entered the workers' world, it often did so not to replace traditional practices but

to augment them; for example, union newsletters and trade journals became crucial extensions of what Robert McCarl would term "cultural scenes." The intricacies of this chapter are too complex to summarize adequately here, but I highly recommend it to anyone interested in occupational folklore generally and in the confluence of formal and informal culture in the workplace specifically.

I am less enthusiastic about the chapters dealing with expressive behaviours, primarily the chapters on the imagination and the natural world. My main objection is that for all his social and political democracy Vincent rarely manages to get clear of his cultural elitism, and many folklorists will have difficulties with his assumptions about folk and popular culture. That the author equates folklore with fallacy and irrationality is underscored by such assertions as "the orally transmitted folk traditions embodied a fundamental failure of comprehension" (p. 157). His handling of folk belief fails to accord any sympathy to the emic perspective, and often draws on extreme examples of fallacious beliefs for evidence. Some of folk medicine's more outlandish prescriptions, such as passing a child over the back of a donkey to cure whooping cough, are used to support arguments like "over the centuries, whole sections of the community had been excluded from a knowledge of how their environment functioned" (p. 156), and yet the author does not allow that in some areas, weather lore for example, the popular knowledge of the environment was remarkably sound. Similarly, his discussion of chap literature and its influence on the popular imagination, while making some very insightful points about the broadside in a context of marginal literacy, is illustrated with untypically awful examples of broadside poetry (p. 203-208), and we are left to infer that these constitute the totality of artistic expression offered by the popular press. Essentially, I would have liked to have seen a much greater familiarity with contemporary folkloristic scholarship, especially since a contrast of pre-literate (oral) and literate traditions is central to the study. Vincent would have been able to take a much more sympathetic stance had he considered recent interpretive studies of folk and popular song, such as those by Roger Renwick, Barre Toelken, or David Buchan's talerole analyses, as well as Bente Alver, David Hufford, or Gillian Bennett's writings on folk medicine and belief.

Apart from the deeper methodological issues, there are a few incidental problems with the book, which have a deleterious cumulative effect. First, folklorists will notice subtle incongruities in the title. While literacy is specifically targeted, the author more generally contrasts formal and informal modes of culture; many of the issues he considers have little to do with the ability to read and write, but rather with the tension between codified and traditional habits and practices. Likewise, the term "popular culture" is used in its broadest sense to indicate working-class culture in general. Ironically, where the book deals with popular culture in the specific sense of mass-mediated culture, its contributions are quite weak. Second, the work assumes a certain familiarity with nineteenth

century social reform movements in England, which are often alluded to without elaboration. While this rarely interferes with the drift of the argument, it is nonetheless irritating to encounter undefined acronyms or contracted forms of titles, which assume, for example, the preordained knowledge that "the League" could refer to none other than the Anti-Corn Law League. In a series entitled "Studies in Oral and Literate Culture", one would expect more effort toward accommodating an interdisciplinary and international audience. Third and perhaps most important, the book contains numerous editorial oversights. Typographical errors and grammatical inconsistencies are frequent and do nothing to spare the reader from the author's already dense writing style.

Despite its shortcomings, *Literacy and Popular Culture* does make significant contributions to scholarship on the oral/literate continuum, especially in the area of occupational studies. Echoing such works as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and, more recently, Harvey J. Graff's *The Legacies of Literacy* and *The Literacy Myth*, it questions our assumptions about literacy and its role in Western culture, particularly in the modern age. As Graff has said, "Literacy is held to be not only important and useful but also an unambiguously positive thing, associated closely with the vital necessities of 'modern', 'developed' persons and societies" (1987:382). Neither the present work nor its counterparts attempt to convince us that literacy is a negative or unnecessary thing, but rather that we have tended to overestimate both the degree and nature of its influence in some sectors of society. They remind us that the rhetoric of literacy often is founded more on intellectual idealism than on reality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

GRAFF, Harvey J., *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987.

James MOREIRA
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland