

Book Review: Benjamin Botkin's *A Treasury of New England Folklore*

Reviewed by Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, October 2019, at www.thetalestheytell.com

It will take nothing, I assume, to convince a reader of a blog on folklore that symbolic acts matter. And just as it was important and felicitous to initiate *The Tales They Tell* with an entry saluting Charlie Johnson and his family, there was never a question as to the first item I would review: Benjamin Botkin's *A Treasury of New England Folklore*. If there is anything approximating a sacred text for New England folklore, this is it.

I am only one of a multitude of folklorists who recognize Botkin as an intellectual hero. His biography itself is the stuff of legend. He was born in 1901 in Boston to Jewish Lithuanian immigrants. Educated in Boston public schools, Botkin attended Harvard, where he encountered folklorists interested in ballads. He graduated Columbia with an M.A. in 1921 and went on to teach at the University of Oklahoma. That's at age twenty, for those of you keeping score. He remained on the faculty until 1940.

In 1929, Botkin edited the publication of an anthology *Folk-Say*, named for a term he coined to express the living and evolving nature of folklore. An annual edition would appear four times, ending in 1932. By then, Botkin had received his Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska. In 1935, he began work with the Oklahoma Writers' Project (a New Deal program) and was, in 1938, promoted to national folklore editor of the Federal Writers' Project. In 1942, Botkin was curator of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. He remained there until 1945. He continued his life as a public folklorist and advocate for applied folklore for another thirty years until his death in 1975. It was during those decades that he edited and published several "Treasures," collections of folklore that became popular among the general public.

There are copious—perhaps countless—reasons to praise Botkin, but I would highlight an observation made by Ellen Stekert in her remembrance penned soon after his death. "Ben Botkin's writings never made him wealthy," she wrote. But "he had better things than money to offer, and he unselfishly gave all that he could to students and scholars who often visited with him and his family in his modest home in Croton-on-Hudson, New York" (336-337). Sage advice, indeed.

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Benjamin Botkin, editor. *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1947.

Benjamin Botkin, editor. *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of Yankee Folk*. Revised Edition. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965.

In 1944, Botkin published *A Treasury of American Folklore*, a collection of traditional stories, songs, games, and expressions of folk beliefs. Although it was criticized by academic folklorists, it was a hit among the general public and remained in print for decades. In 2012, the Library of Congress named it as one of the hundred “Books That Shaped America.” In 2016, Globe Pequot Press reissued this culturally significant masterpiece.

Botkin followed the American treasury with a series of regional ones, starting with New England. First published in 1947, *A Treasury of New England Folklore* saw a revised edition in 1965, followed by a reprint in 1983. It is, like its sibling, a massive collection of folkloric tales, songs, customs, and related traditions, culled from hundreds of previously published works and interviews conducted by Botkin or members of the FWP. A single story—“Thar She Blows!”—made the leap from the American to the New England volume.

To be absolutely clear, the New England treasury is a collection, not an analysis of folkloric tales. Its aim is to introduce readers to the range of folkloric stories in New England and to celebrate its storytellers. Both editions are commanding in their size and scope. The 1947 edition comprises 934 pages! For the 1965 revision, Botkin whittled it down to a mere 618. Although both share plentifully, they also contain sizeable amounts of material that differ from one another and should be considered separate works. Strap yourself in, dear readers. I’ll be as succinct as possible, but there’s much to cover.

Both editions are organized into five parts:

- *Fabulous Yankees*
- *Myths, Legends, and Traditions*
- *Beliefs and Customs*
- *Word Lore*
- *Songs and Rhymes*

Each of the five parts further breaks into a number of sections whose titles remain relatively consistent between the two editions. Each section commences with a brief introduction penned by Botkin, with only a minor edit to one sentence in the revised edition.

The general *Introduction* to the book differs between editions, although certain observations appear in both. In the 1947 volume, Botkin contends that Yankees make good folklorists on account of their interest in the past and their preservation of stories and customs, but he also pushes the notion of the region as a place of such homogeneity in identity as to almost warrant being conceptualized as a separate nation from the United States. He abandoned that line in the second edition, preferring instead to describe the “new regionalism” movement in the twentieth century and its impact upon folklore collections. In the revised edition Botkin also notes the omission “of what seems to me less essential material in favor of important new material” (xvi), but does not elaborate.

Part One: Fabulous Yankees is, perhaps with a touch of irony, the trickiest part for contemporary readers. It consists of three sections: *Yankee Peddlers and Tricksters* (renamed *The Yankee’s Reputation* in 1965); *Local Characters*; and *Stout Fellows and Hard Liars*. Each is replete with anecdotes, tall tales,

jokes, personal narratives, and folk histories. Many provide examples of the dry humor and sharp wit that characterize New England—and many still stand up today and summon laughter from the reader.

But this part of the book is also the most beholden to a New England that is long gone for numerous people who live in the region today. It is the New England of general stores, peddlers, blacksmiths, stagecoaches, church deacons, and daily life that revolves around farming, fishing, hunting, and whaling. It's a New England that is, as an entry appearing only in 1947 collection details, distinctly *English* in spirit—something that might derisively be called WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in the later twentieth century. And truth be told, it is the New England of the nineteenth century.

I mean that literally. In both editions, the first section draws upon as many sources from the 1800s as it does from the 1900s. It reflects a way of life that does not quite fit with a world of supermarkets, automobiles, airplanes, and the internet. That's not to suggest the observations are unimportant or even obsolete. And I know that plenty of you could point out places in New England that still observe those older ways. My point, merely, is that much of the opening of this excellent book will not resonate with the contemporary experiences of a considerable number of modern readers.

The differences between *Part One* in the two editions are remarkable. It's a fool's errand to count the exact number due to the shifting ways Botkin organized the material, but there's roughly 250 stories in the first edition that do not appear in the second and roughly 100 stories in the second that do not appear in the first. Several of the expunged tales in the first edition celebrate the Yankee peddler, but others present anecdotes of travelling, practical wags, Yankee conservatism, and witticisms. The additions in the revised edition include lengthy excerpts of interviews that Botkin conducted with ten storytellers in four towns in New Hampshire in 1964.

Again, for the general reader primarily seeking entertainment, the entries constituting *Part One* in both editions will be hit or miss. You could readily flip through the pages randomly and land on a gem—and if you don't land accordingly, keep flipping. They are there. For the serious student of New England folklore, both editions contain poignantly useful information that would take weeks to cull independently. Botkin was of that generation of scholars who read deeply. It shows. *Part One* remains an invaluable resource to folklorists today.

It is interesting, furthermore, to ponder the items that Botkin left out of the revised edition. He removed anecdotes about indigenous people, especially those concerning "drunken Indians"—even the ones in which Indians get the better of whites. He also deleted three anecdotes about slaves which were not all charitable in their representation. I suspect that his leftist politics and professional acumen inspired this decision as the Civil Rights Movement burgeoned between the two editions.

If *Part One* runs the risk of seeming quaint, *Part Two: Myths, Legends, and Traditions* delivers the promise of the weird and the uncanny. It is in these pages, mostly, that readers find classic New England folklore lurking across four sections: *Wonders of the Invisible World*; *The Powers of Darkness*; *Place Lore*; and *Historical Traditions*. Here are introductory tales of the Moodus Noises, the Palatine Light, and the Great New England Sea Serpent. Here are ghost stories and foreboding narratives of the Devil, witches, and Captain Kidd. Here are the heroic exploits of Ethan Allen, Israel Putnam, and the Angel of Hadley.

Here are compelling anecdotes of legendary eccentrics and of the names for places such as the White Mountains, Cape Cod, and Point Judith. There's even something called a Yankee Doodle awaiting readers here.

I am not wont to criticize Botkin, but I do think an error was made concerning the amount of material of *Part Two* that he cut from the original to the revised edition. There are roughly 150 stories left out of the second helping and only a handful of new ones added. Those that are absent are imperative to the grand scope of New England folklore, including more stories of ghosts, pirates, witches, and the Devil, and narratives of figures such as Johnny Appleseed, Paul Revere, Daniel Webster, and the eccentric Leather Man. A number of place-name lore also disappears, including places that remain good sites for hiking and legend tripping today, including Bish Bash Falls, Carbuncle Pond, and various Purgatories. The elimination of the legend of Micah Rood's bloody apples seems an especially odd decision. It is on account of these stories that I would recommend the 1947 over the 1965 edition if one must choose to read only one.

Given the deletion of specific tales concerning Rogers' Rangers, Chocorua's Curse, the White Mountains, and Lovers' Leaps, I again suspect that one consideration motivating Botkin was the negative portrayal of indigenous people that such tales foster. He was aware of this issue and directly addressed it as early as the first edition when, in a book otherwise devoid of anything approximating political commentary, he admonished "local bias," lamented slurs in folklore, and summarized:

Among the specious and spurious place-name stories Indian or pseudo-Indian fancies run a close second to haunts of the Devil, in persistence and mediocrity. For the folklorist they have the interest of migratory legends (e.g., the Lovers' Leap and Pocahontas motifs)—a species of traveling local legend which always turns up like a bad penny. They also have the historical interest of period-pieces, since in both their style and their content, they reflect the taste of a past generation—a generation that apparently attempted to make amends for exterminating the Indian by romanticizing him, only to continue to kill him off by suicide, as if the only good Indian was an Indian who died for love. (424)

Botkin similarly removed one entry that contained the n-word in a place-name but maintained a story about the Underground Railroad in the same section. This seems consistent with the pattern of changes observed in *Part One*. (I should note that both editions do contain a sea chantey with a footnoted variant containing the n-word.)

Part Three: Beliefs and Customs offers a glimpse into the social life of New England—again, mostly of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and the elements of folklore that bond communities, including foodways, divination practices, weather lore, cures and related folk medicine, traditional activities and pastimes, games, and calendar customs and holidays. It is broken into two sections with ambiguous titles: *The Power of Faith*; and *The Force of Custom*. Some of these entries resonate clearly with contemporary expectations and performances; others ring with the distinct chimes of a bygone era. There are a few differences between the two editions, but their content is generally the same in *Part*

Three. The first edition contains roughly three dozen items that did not make it to the revised one, while the latter one adds only a handful.

Botkin did remove for the revised edition an entry on the Dark Day—that momentous May 19, 1780, when the daytime skies above New England turned to the darkness of night—which also strikes me as an unusual judgment, but the entry contained a story about a frightened slave that he might have decided was better not to pass along. And if I may be allowed to express a minor personal complaint, I would note that Botkin removed various items relevant to Rhode Island (my home state) and to alcohol, including Alice Morse Earle’s comments on flip.

Part Four: Word Lore contains, as the title suggests, collections of items associated with New England folk speech, including regional terms, commentaries on dialects, naming and nicknaming practices, and proverbs and similar traditional sayings. It too diverges into two sections: *Yankeeisms*; and *Folk-Say*. It is all very helpful for anyone doing historical research, but in many ways, this part is also the most fun to explore—or at least the most nerdy fun. There’s something rewarding about seeing whether or not a term has survived into contemporary parlance or gleaned the often delightful insights obtained from folk etymologies. (And yes, there are a few conflicting entries on the meaning and origin of the word “Yankee.”)

In an era when we can celebrate *Talk like a Pirate Day*, I am bemused and almost disappointed that someone has not yet capitalized on this nostalgic impulse and initiated *Talk like a Yankee Day*. Perhaps the problem lies in the possibility that a large percentage of New Englanders might think such a festive obligation signifies the rivals to our beloved Red Sox. And I can only imagine the charming diplomacy with which members of Red Sox Nation would imitate New York fans. Still, if that event ever organizes, Botkin has done the demanding work of preparing the guidelines.

By my count, the differences of *Part Four* between the two editions are scant. I spotted only two entries in the first edition that did not make the second—including “combed with a hatchel” (which I have heard as “combed with a hatchet” now that most people do not know what a hatchel is) and “Eighteen Hundred and freeze to death” regarding a horrifically cold winter in Maine in 1817. Again, by my count, four additions joined the revised collection, including “shun-pikes,” “thank’ee Ma’ams,” names of apples, and sayings attributed to Ethan Allen.

Part Five: Songs and Rhymes is identical in both editions and akin to its immediately preceding siblings also contains two sections: *Ballads and Songs*; and *Rhymes and Jingles*. These are, like the rest of the book, an indispensable introductory collection. In several entries, Botkin includes the musical notation, so they are ready to be performed, but their value as glimpses into an ethnomusicological past cannot be understated.

Some of the entries are comic, some are tragic, and some are deadly serious in their content. The collection includes hymns of freedom, slavery songs, sea chanteys, war songs, lumberjack songs, and lullabies. Important—and ever-evolving—ballads appear in these pages, including “The Pesky Sarpent” and “The Battle of Bunker Hill.” Others tell of murders, broken hearts, and heroic or eccentric adventures. In selecting the entries for *Part Five*, Botkin paid keen attention to earlier works that

detailed the transformation of British ballads into American ones, as well as those songs that uniquely defined the new nation. On paper the scope is stunningly impressive, and it is guaranteed to bring an itch to the reader to hear these songs performed live.

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So does *A Treasury of New England Folklore* hold up?

As I said at the onset, Botkin's book is as close to a sacred work in New England folklore as there can be. But like all Holy Writ, it's a product of the era of its creation and certain elements do not translate well over time or into different cultural contexts. It is, put bluntly, generally devoid of the contributions (or even the recognition) of immigrants except for infrequent mention of the Irish, Portuguese, and French-Canadians. By its very assortment of entries it assumes—and nourishes the impression—that New England is fundamentally Protestant. There is no doubt that it depicts a world in which sexual orientation and gender are binary and limited, and several of its representations of women would not hold water today.

Indeed, as a fitting anecdote, I would note the symbol that Botkin himself employed in the *Introduction* of both editions to hammer home the representation of the Yankee, namely the Great Stone Face—the Old Man of the Mountain in New Hampshire. As readers of this blog surely know, that steadfast symbol came crashing down in May 2003. In other words, the *Treasury* needs to be read as an encyclopedic collection of historical sources.

Botkin was, furthermore, not shy of drawing upon literature, a point of contention between him and another preeminent folklorist of the previous century, Richard Dorson, who damned the book with faint praise—and some outright damnation—in a review in 1948. One of Dorson's criticisms was precisely that Botkin's populist desire to promote folklore among the general public led him to muddy the waters and to include literary works that did not fit the bill of genuine folklore.

In a telling example of how that complaint landed, Botkin included an entry from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in 1947 but removed it for the 1965 edition and replaced it with a folkloric story of Caldera Dick, another white whale, which may have inspired Melville. I regret seeing the removal of literary passages, however, because I think their inclusion does a service to modern readers who very well may not be familiar with New England literature. For that reason, I again recommend the first edition as essential and the second as a complement.

There is plenty of New England folklore missing from these pages, including items that would have been in circulation when Botkin compiled both editions. If I may draw on Connecticut folklore that is fresh on my mind, legends about the Charter Oak and the glawackus are glaring omissions. The paltry example in the first edition of the Leather Man, a major figure in folklore, and Botkin's decision to drop his tale altogether in the second epitomizes the limitations of both books. And as Dorson noted, Botkin did not consult newspapers, which admittedly resulted in significant gaps.

But look, we're all human. If I may have permission to indulge, it took me weeks of reading to produce a book on eccentrics—a work directly inspired, by the way, by Botkin's treasury and his comment that New England bred eccentrics instead of heroes. I labored through weeks of combing through books, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and bins of historical materials stored away at libraries. That was followed by weeks of arguing with myself (and occasionally my patient editor, Evan Helmlinger) about whom to include and how to present them. And then there were weeks of drafts and edits spent at my desk instead of on hikes or with, you know, my family. And I had to laugh to keep from sighing when I saw one of the few online reviews that concluded, succinctly, "It was okay." Three stars. But I would expect nothing less from an honest and irreverent New Englander who paid good money for a book.

I'm cutting Botkin as much slack as he wants, then, because this treasury was a ludicrous idea to begin with, but one motivated by an undeniable and affluent admiration from the child of Jewish Lithuanian immigrants for New England and New Englanders. Even with their faults—and their *blunders* as Botkin, drawing from Josh Billings, politely admitted would appear in the 1947 *Introduction*—both editions belong on bookshelves and in the reading hands of an educated public.

Perhaps someday a reissued volume combining these marvelous collections will see the deserved light of publication. I don't know if such a venture would make money, but let us recall that Ben Botkin, the consummate folklorist, did not do things for money. Like a good New Englander, he did things because they needed to be done. Surely there's a lesson in that.

(Thanks to Ray Huling for comments on a draft of this review.)

Additional Works Cited

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