

America's Folklorist: B. A. Botkin and American Culture

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America may be forgiven for not knowing that Benjamin Albert Botkin (1901–1975) was its folklorist, since Botkin's greatest popular impact occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, arguably peaking in 1944 with the publication of his bestselling *A Treasury of American Folklore*. He continued to be important within the folklore community long after that, of course, collecting folk material and publishing books and articles on specific areas of American lore virtually until the time of his death. Born in Boston to Jewish parents (he was a cousin of George and Ira Gershwin), Botkin graduated from Harvard at age nineteen and went on to earn his master's degree from Columbia and his doctorate from the University of Nebraska. It was while teaching English at the University of Oklahoma in the 1920s and 1930s that he fully immersed himself in folklore. His prominence in the field subsequently won him appointments in the Federal Writers Project, the Works Progress Administration, and the Library of Congress.

Botkin believed folklore was everywhere—from songs and stories, to workplace lingo, to comic strips—and that since it arose from the “folk” who created, modified, and passed it on, it should be returned to and enjoyed by those same folks. In other words, folklore should be popularized. That democratic notion was opposed by academic folklorists—most notably by Richard Dorson of Indiana University—who were intent on making folklore a rigidly defined academic discipline upon which degree-granting departments and reputations could be built. Dorson dismissively styled Botkin's approach as “fakelore.”

This collection of appreciative essays should go a long way toward ensuring Botkin the recognition his work has so decisively earned. In addition to the scholarly commentaries, the book reprints six of Botkin's own essays and nine of his poems, as well as reminiscences from his son and daughter on what it was like to grow up in his presence. The book is indexed and has a lengthy and valuable bibliography. Reading these assessments, with their multiplicity of details, is like watching a vivid portrait emerge from a thousand separate brush strokes.

EDWARD MORRIS (November / December 2010)

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