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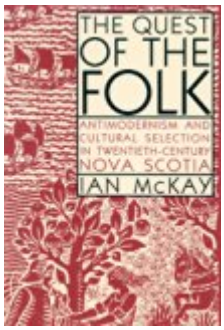

Ian McKay. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. xvii + 371 pp. $55.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-7735-1179-2; $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-1248-1.

Reviewed by Dorothy Turner

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Ian McKay's *oeuvre* manifests a happy and unusual alliance of political engagement and rigorous academic scholarship. His early work confirms his credentials both as historian of Nova Scotia and as political polemicist.[1] His academic work has focused on Maritime labor history; indeed, *Quest of the Folk* finds its genesis as a chapter in another work on Nova Scotian political culture (p. 38).[2]

McKay's *Quest of the Folk* is composed of five chapters, two of which examine the careers of two important shapers of modern Nova Scotia culture, Helen Creighton and Mary Black. McKay devotes the other three chapters to a sociological analysis of what he calls the "mythomoteur" of Innocence, an elaborate set of interrelated myths (p. 30), and the effects of popular images of Nova Scotians as Folk. To historians of the Maritimes, McKay offers a trenchant genealogy of a central set of cultural myths, supported by (largely) well-organized and (always) comprehensive notes.[3] To other cultural historians and non-specialists in Maritime history, *Quest of the Folk* recommends itself as a model "most promising for future academic and political work, [representing]...an attempt to reconcile...Marxian political economy and Foucauldian genealogy--by combining their strengths in a third, neo-Gramscian framework" (p. 296). This review will first examine McKay's contribution to the cultural history of Nova Scotia. It will conclude with a brief critique of McKay's theoretical paradigm.

Quest of the Folk is a genealogy of the myth of Folk in Nova Scotia. This genealogy draws its evidence from the careers of Helen Creighton, the folklorist who "stood for the idea of the Folk in the province" (p. 43), and Mary Black, the province's "pre-eminent craft revivalist" (p. 153). In two extended chapters, each of which stands comfortably on its own, McKay traces, through written documents private and public, the two women's influences on the dominant representations of Nova Scotia. Both women were impelled by a combination of public and private interests. McKay builds a dialectic between the cultural origins of these private interests and their tremendous power to shape the culture that contains and reflects them.[4]

McKay pays close attention to what the cultural historian David Whisnant calls the "marvellously tangled skein of assumptions, preconceptions, motives and rationales" that impels such "cultural intervention[s]" as those of Creighton and Black.[5] Both women belonged to an emerging female professional class, adherents of Victorian ideas of class and gender as those were played out in early twentieth-century Halifax. McKay locates further influences on Creighton's work as ballad collector and Folk popularizer in her career aspirations [6], in her belief in the supernatural (p. 120), and in the importance of the popularization of Folk culture. Black's career as handicraft revivalist was "guided by ideals of efficiency, competitiveness, moral therapy, and commerce" (p. 179). In McKay's careful analysis each of these influences shapes but does not dominate Black and Creighton as they pursue their careers in mid-century Nova Scotia.

If these careers provide extensive primary data for McKay's analysis, the bulk of his text is devoted to a sophisticated neo-Marxian reading of the "politics of culture" in Nova Scotia.[7] McKay founds his analysis of "cultural selection" on his observation that "The image of an antique Nova Scotia made up of slow moving and slow-talking Folk resistant to change has been popular as an explanation...of why the local economy has not grown and why Nova Scotians nurse grievances against Toronto. The brash, energetic (or, more crudely, intelligent) Maritimers get out, leaving behind the timid, the overly cautious, and the stupid. Underdevelopment is thus a consequence of a quaint Folk mentality" (pp. 271-72). Thus Folk mythology, its origins in capitalist enterprise and in its tourism capacity still "a mainstay of middle-class cultural and economic life" (p. and economic order.[8]

Working from this basic Marxian principle, McKay claims to have two main objectives. He wants to trace "when and why" the representations of rural Nova Scotians as Folk arose, and this he accomplishes largely through his close examination of Black's and Creighton's careers and their effects on "middle-class cultural producers--writers, visual artists, promoters, [and] advertisers" (p. 8). McKay claims also, however, that he wants to examine the consequences of "that social and cultural category...for the region in general and for Nova Scotia in particular" (p. 8). This second element of McKay's inquiry is more risky than his neo-Marxian analyses of the careers of Black and Creighton, but his investigation of "antimodernism and cultural selection" also locates ***Quest of the Folk*** among theoretical works of more than local interest.

The myth of the Folk in Nova Scotia, McKay has demonstrated, depended on the activities of cultural producers such as Black and Creighton. In fact, ***"There never were any Folk. There were only the categories and vigorously redescribed if not invented traditions that enabled us to think there were"*** (p. 302; cf. p. 275; this passage appears in italics in McKay's text).

McKay's background as polemicist informs his Foucauldian-based call for intellectuals to rethink the relationship between cultural producers and indigenous populations. McKay's "ideological critique," he contends, forms part of the purview of the "left" (p. 295). Further, any "creative dialogue" between cultural producers and local populations with regard to "the lines that divided legitimate if inevitably partial interpretation from the abuse of cultural power" would depend on "a deeper connection between the intellectual and the non-intellectual, a reciprocal sense of sharing in something of the same cultural project, and an entirely different type of cultural hegemony -- not the...model of the Folk as natural resource" (pp. 246-47).[9] According to these "deeper understandings" the "left" imagines "subaltern groups as creative and dynamic forces...[and appreciates] the memories of the struggles of the oppressed" (p. 296). McKay's argument here depends on the possibility of a non-exploitive and creative dia-

logue between cultural producers and (representatives from?) the populations upon whom these producers depend.

It is this model of dialogue that causes me some confusion. On the basis of his analysis McKay concludes that dialogue is possible, that the contemporary "crisis of the concept of the Folk represents some surprising opportunities for progressive cultural change" (p. 276). Rather than provide an instance of the kind of dialogue he envisions, however, McKay's argument reverts to the rigid Marxian analysis that he (***pace*** Hall) had so carefully avoided throughout his meticulous work. McKay uses the example of a "post-modern adaptation of the idea of the Folk," the Halifax Busker's Festival. After a perceptive analysis of the event as "Vaguely 'Folk-like' and pre-industrial in its revival of an old European form" (p. 281), McKay asserts that "Surely no one who attends the Busker's Festival...is under the illusion that what she is seeing has any autonomous existence outside the brave new world of tourism. No-one taking part...can be blind to the directly commercial role played by such staged events." According to this assertion, individuals who accept the Busker's Festival as a "genuine" or "autonomous" cultural event are naive or guilty of wilful ignorance. Further, McKay claims, "True postmoderns accept the fragmented, the spectacular, and the contrived as aspects of contemporary cultural experience" (p. 281; cf. p. 308). Who is a "true" postmodern? Can an individual who actually believes that Buskers offer a "genuine" glimpse of history engage in a creative dialogue with the intellectuals who deconstruct it? This is a real question.

But it is not necessarily Ian McKay's responsibility to answer this question. Seldom do we see intellectual analyses engage as precisely and comprehensively with lived experience as does ***Quest of the Folk***, nor are most academics so willing to admit their political engagement. Sophisticated and conscientious works such as ***Quest of the Folk*** encourage our scrutiny of the relationships between political and academic life.

Notes

[1] His dissertation, for example, focused on local history ("Industry, Work and Community in the Cumberland Coalfields, 1828-1927" [Dalhousie University, 1983]). McKay also edited the ***New Maritimes*** periodical in the late 1980s.

[2] The related volume is ***Roads to Innocence: Tourism and the Politics of Culture in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*** (see ***Quest***, p. 37).

[3] A few mistakes do creep in. On p. 309, for example, the poet George Frederick Clark is misnamed George Elliot Clark (error corrected in the bibliography); note 47 in chapter five provides abbreviated reference to a tract that appears not to be listed in the bibliography. Errors are not common enough to be distracting.

[4] Thus McKay agrees with the "careful Gramscian" (p. 301) premise of Stuart Hall that "It is...possible to hold both the proposition that material interests help to structure ideas and the proposition that position in the social structure has the tendency to influence the direction of social thought, without also arguing that material factors univocally determine ideology or that class position represents a guarantee that a class will have the appropriate forms of consciousness." ("The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," in ***Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture***, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 45.

[5] David E. Whisnant, ***All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 260.

[6] She was told by Dr. Henry Munro of the Nova Scotia Department of Education in 1929 that if she could "find only one ['authentic'] ballad, your fortune would be made" (p. 55).

[7] Whisnant provides the following rationale for the phrase: "Just as every act in a complex social order is inescapably political in character, so is it bound up--in origin, intent, and effect--with culture. Thus culture must inevitably be construed in political terms" (*Native* , p. 259).

[8] Inherent "in the concept [of the Folk] itself is a reactionary sociology which, when applied to oneself or to society as a whole, removes any detailed consideration of the structure of power" (p. 298).

[9] McKay's model of Folk as natural resource, derived from the work of Neil Rosenberg, sees Folk as "'something which is nonrenewable,...a static form, a survival,' the 'fossilized remains from earlier patterns of culture'" (*Quest*, p. 110).

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