

The conscience of the individual comes from the group; it is the group and not the association of individuals with consciousness that is paramount in Ward's view. The individual apprehends and understands his own experience through the criteria which he derives from his own society; to quote Ward "we see, think, and react by means of socially inherited norms." He quotes with approval H. Stuart Hughes statement that an historian is a "retrospective cultural anthropologist." This means, of course, that he is totally opposed to the view of society that was espoused by the subjects of his famous book on Jacksonian Democracy, the notion that the atomistic individual (apart from society and apart from inherited traditions) is the central fact in the nature of the universe.

In the introduction he also shows that both Jackson and Emerson, diverse as they might have been in other respects, shared the same assumptions about the nature of American culture. In other words, Ward espouses the concept of a climate of opinion shared by the majority of people in a given time and place. As he puts it, "we discover a common assumption about the central value of American culture: the assertion of the worth of the totally liberated, self-sufficient, atomistic, single individual."

Ward believes that the "subject of history is always and finally what it means to be a human being;" and he concludes that the concept of culture "may even remind all of us of the need for general order in our divided culture." Although Ward's essays do not always support the theory which he espouses, the general direction of his thought clearly is a guide for all of those who are engaged in the study of American culture and American society.

RWS

oral history: a pioneering study

THE SAGA OF COE RIDGE: A STUDY IN ORAL HISTORY. By William Lynwood Montell. The University of Tennessee Press. 1970. \$8.95.

For the study of the culture of a people, of their way of life, their world-view and values, written sources are generally either inadequate or non-existent. Oral history, often condemned by historians as unreliable, must be a major tool.

To test the usefulness of oral tradition, William Lynwood Montell attempted to reconstruct the history of a "legendary" colony of Blacks in southern Kentucky. After interviewing some seventeen former members of the colony and twenty-two Whites who lived in the area, he collated the testimonies into "archetypes," more complete and reliable stories than were known by any one informant. Out of these archetypes the history of the Coe colony emerged.

Just after the Civil War, a group of ex-slaves took possession of an isolated wooded ridge near the Cumberland River. The colony persisted for almost a hundred years, until the late 1950's. Its members lived from the produce of their gardens, from logging and rafting on the river and later from making and bottlegging moonshine. There was antagonism between the colony and some of the Whites of the region. The Blacks gave as good as they received, and through the years a number of people on both sides were killed. Accounts of these deaths and the circumstances surrounding them dominate this "archetypal" folk history. The

consensus of all informants is that, at least until recent times, the troubles were almost always started by the Whites.

From 1885 to 1920 a number of White women came to live at the colony. White reaction was, in general, apathetic, though in one case an attempt at elopement between two White girls and two members of the colony resulted in the killing of an uninvolved Black.

For the period after 1940, Montell's history breaks down, primarily because the Coes allegedly began burglarizing and robbing homes and stores. Accounts of these crimes are esoteric, made by the Whites of the region. "I made no attempt to collect accounts of thievery from the Negroes themselves," Montell admits.

The colony no longer exists. Its former members now live in northern cities, driven out, most of them, by the law. What remains are a few log buildings engulfed in weeds, a number of disjointed memories, and, now, this book.

Montell accomplishes what he set out to do: he shows that history can be written even in the virtual absence of written sources, and he shows a way of testing oral accounts by comparing them to one another. He calls attention to what he calls "a totally untapped reservoir of American history, . . . the numberless folk groups like those of Coe Ridge whose history will remain unwritten unless more historians become willing to turn to the spoken word" (p. 196).

But why should we bother to study such communities at all? Montell does not tell us. The historian's job is not only to establish dates, but also to point out significance, to show interrelationships. Montell does not do this. By what criteria does the historian fabricate his history; how does he decide which anecdotes to put in the text and which to relegate to the notes? Montell fails to distinguish between anecdotal data, elicited in a non-directive manner—which is emic, significant to the informant—and ethnographic data elicited through controlled questioning, the significance of which is etic, dependent on the outside observer. Was it by emic or etic criteria that Montell chose to devote a chapter to "The White Gals"? Did he use the same criteria in deciding to give over a chapter to logging? If his purpose was to provide a model for history based on oral sources, he failed in this most important regard.

At the end of his work, Montell presents "five cardinal tenets," generalizations from his study which, if valid, could be used as assumptions by future historians. Several of these generalizations, though, simply are not valid. Montell suggests, for example, that "for the sections of the story where there is total agreement among the informants, the folk historian can, without too much hesitancy, accept these as factual history" (p. 194). This principle is the foundation for the construction of archetypes, therefore of his basic method. Yet any student of legend (including Montell) knows that there can be perfect agreement among all members of a community on the historicity of events that never occurred. Which only goes to show the dangers of generalizing from a single case.

The Saga of Coe Ridge, in fine, contains methodological inadequacies and errors—but how could one expect otherwise in a pioneering work? It needs to be rigorously criticized simply because it deserves to be. Montell demonstrates that oral history can be more than just anecdotes about well-known men; it can become a basic method for the study of American culture.

University of Kansas

Robert Jerome Smith