

Made available courtesy of the University of Chicago Press. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the University of Chicago Press.



CHICAGO JOURNALS

WINTERTHUR



---

Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940 by Jane S. Becker

Review by: Benjamin Filene

*Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), pp. 268-272

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215263>

Accessed: 07/03/2013 10:18

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The University of Chicago Press and Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Winterthur Portfolio*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ful means of probing the links between buildings and society.

JEANNE HALGREN KILDE  
Macalester College

**Jane S. Becker.** *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930–1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xv + 331 pp.; illustrations, index. \$55.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

It is tempting to say that in *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930–1940* Jane Becker gives us a glimpse of another world—the Appalachian Mountains in the era of the Great Depression, when mountaineers pursued the craft traditions that to this day shape our conception of them. This image, however, runs counter to the central point of Becker’s eye-opening book: mountaineers were *not* “another world” at all; they (and the crafts they produced) were very much influenced by northern industrialists, designers, promoters, and social workers who defined and reshaped Appalachian “tradition.” Perhaps, then, we see the collision of two worlds—the culture of the mountaineers with that of the outsiders who “discovered” and promoted them? No, Becker insists. By the 1930s outside influences had been infiltrating Appalachian culture for more than half a century. The Appalachians and modern, industrial America were interconnected and cross-cut worlds, and the mountaineers themselves were hardly passive agents in the popular promotion of their culture.

No doubt, Becker would enjoy our difficulty at reducing her complex and carefully researched work to a catch phrase. *Selling Tradition* sets out to upend our romantic preconceptions about “tradition” and “the folk” and drop us in the murky waters of folk revivalism, where past and present, culture and politics forever churn together. As she deals with powerful currents in largely uncharted waters, Becker at times struggles with the undertow of her own cultural-political assumptions. In the end, though, she guides her readers to shores from which, suddenly, the land left behind takes on new shape. If *Selling Tradition* does not take us to another world, it does help us see our own afresh.

The core chapters of *Selling Tradition* examine the often competing efforts by depression-era or-

ganizations and institutions to direct the production, distribution, and promotion of mountain crafts to consumers beyond the Appalachians. Wisely, Becker recognizes that this story has roots that extend far beyond the realm of handicrafts and reach back well into the nineteenth century. Her first chapter, “The Domestication of Tradition,” describes the range of forms through which “folk culture” entered the consciousness (and, often, the homes) of middle-class Americans in the 1930s. From the photography of the Farm Security Administration to the fiddlers at the National Folk Festival to the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, American culture increasingly became defined as indigenous culture—the more rooted in local tradition and in untrained “authentic” expression the better. This chapter is thorough but takes on a textbook-like quality as it moves from example to example. Anyone familiar with William Stott’s more inspired, book-length version of this argument (*Documentary Expression and Thirties America*) will find this ground familiar.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2, “Creating an Appalachian America,” provides further background, tracing how the Appalachians began to capture northerners’ imaginations between 1880 and 1935. Here, Becker compares early, popular representations with the economic and social realities of the mountaineers’ daily lives. Already she debunks several myths about the supposed isolation and simplicity of mountain life. Even by the 1830s, for example, log cabins were being displaced by one- and two-story frame houses; by 1900 northern-based coal companies owned much of the land in the region, and the railroad was extending toward the area’s farthest reaches; and by 1930, Appalachian dress, music, and crafts had changed considerably under the influence of urban markets and radio. All of these realities were disquieting to (and, therefore, largely ignored by) folk-festival promoters, local-color fiction writers, and settlement-school teachers who worked to understand, uplift, and, usually, transform mountain life. As Henry D. Shapiro and, most stirringly, David Whisnant have demonstrated, the efforts of these cultural workers were grounded in a romanticized vision of an Appalachian past, one in which rustic mountaineers occupied themselves by playing hammered dulcimers, carving wood,

<sup>1</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

and weaving homespun coverlets—a past that, for the most part, never existed.<sup>2</sup>

Becker's original contribution to this story is her discussion of how the revivalist impulse intersected with the modern economy in the realm of handicrafts. Chapters 3 through 6 elaborate the complex web of organizations and interests that shaped craft production in the 1930s. In chapter 3, "The Southern Highland Handicraft Guild," Becker focuses on a federation of craft-production centers and schools that was established in 1929. Spearheaded by college-educated, middle-class women from mountain schools and settlements, the guild, Becker shows, was torn between preserving craft traditions as forms of indigenous cultural expression and treating them as commodities with market potential. In the end, the guild simultaneously pursued both approaches. In the name of authenticity, some leaders worked to confine craftspeople to antiquated tools; meanwhile, the guild's emblem became a certification of genuineness that enhanced a product's marketability.

Although the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild was ambivalent about marketing handicrafts, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1935 launched a cooperative devoted expressly to making craftwork more economically profitable. Named, confusingly, Southern Highlanders, Inc., the cooperative set out to restructure the handicraft industry from top to bottom, including, Becker writes, "the design, production, sales, and advertisement" of mountain crafts (p. 90). Chapter 4, "Order out of Chaos," charts how the cooperative, even though it shared many members in common with the Southern Highland guild, brought a new determination to reach middle-class consumers. Becker argues that in the name of ameliorating rural poverty the cooperative imposed industrial capitalism's emphasis on rationality, standardization, and centralization on the rural mountain economy. As Becker shows as well, however, the mountaineers were not simply passive agents in the face of these modernizing impulses. Chapter 5, "I Start as Early as I Can and Work as Hard as I Can," depicts the crafts system from the mountaineers' point of view, emphasizing

ing that crafts to them were about hard work and making a living as much as about tradition. The mountaineers, Becker writes, "were deliberate actors in a specific historical time rather than vague and shadowy remnants of a distant past" (p. 126).

In the 1930s the organization perhaps most committed to locating the mountaineers in the present was the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, the subject of chapter 6, "Labor or Leisure?" Supported by extensive field research, the bureau set out to overturn the myth that crafts were leisure-time products of contented farm women. Instead, the bureau likened mountain women to industrial home workers—exploited laborers who struggled in oppressive circumstances to produce goods for sale. The bureau's efforts contributed to the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which included craftspeople among the home laborers subject to wage and hour controls. This legislation forced the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild to reexamine its assumptions about the rustic simplicity of mountain life.

For the most part, though, the idea that the mountaineers were part of the modern industrial world failed to penetrate public consciousness. Becker's final chapter, "Selling Tradition," traces how even as crafts became more and more influenced by product designers, efficiency experts, distribution agents, and advertising executives, their greatest selling point remained their connection to the past. In Becker's view, the myth of simple, natural mountain life became a commodity itself, one that could be purchased from souvenir stands, department stores, or catalogues. Middle-class Americans decorated their homes with Appalachian-style furniture, pottery, and baskets—not because of the objects' functionality or beauty but because the crafts brought an idealized past into the realm of domestic consumption.

*Selling Tradition's* strength is Becker's ability to reveal the multifaceted economic relationships that sustained the crafts industry. Her depth of knowledge is stunning. In one section, she details the Southern Highland guild's membership policies, production standards, promotion techniques, and commission rates. At another point, she carefully elucidates potential sources of geographic bias in the Women's Bureau work (by including central and western Kentucky in its study, the bureau may have surveyed a disproportionate

<sup>2</sup> Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Minds: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); David Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

number of large chair and quilt manufacturing companies). A typical passage outlines how the bedspread industry's distribution system passed on hidden costs to the craftsperson: "Tufters [spread makers] . . . absorbed the costs of transporting the spreads to rural homes. Sometimes these 'hauling' arrangements were quite informal. In other cases, large companies with a wide geographical distribution of tufters relied on complex systems of haulers and subhaulers, and they sometimes established 'spread sheds' in rural areas as bases of distribution: the haulers' commissions came out of the price for each spread and thus out of the craftswomen's wages" (pp. 140–41). Such level of detail can overwhelm the more casual reader, but the complexity reinforces one of Becker's key points—that craft production was hardly the quaint, nostalgic process it was thought to be.

This theme comes through most vividly when Becker roots her ideas in the stories of specific people. While individual voices do not appear as often as one would wish (due, perhaps, to a paucity of sources), when they do surface they bring out a level of human drama that usually remains beneath the surface in Becker's analysis. *Selling Tradition* introduces a cast of characters that has remained largely hidden from history—the cultural workers who shaped popular conceptions of mountain culture. There is Allen Eaton, author of the seminal *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* and one of the organizers of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild.<sup>3</sup> His book includes staged photographs of the granddaughters of William Creech of Pine Mountain, Kentucky, posed in homespun costumes and using a hand-powered grinding mill. (One of the girls went on to become a doctor.) There is Winogene Redding, the founder of the Weavers Guild at the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Redding taught mountain women to weave, providing designs herself because, she explained, the women "had no background of how other people lived and [how] what they made in their homes could be used in somebody else's home" (p. 73). There is Isadora Williams, a "home demonstration agent" for the state agricultural extension services in Alabama and then Tennessee. "You don't have to make it like you like it," she told her pupils. "You have to make it like the person who buys it likes it. . . . You have to forget your-

selves" (pp. 76–77). There is Mary Rodney, manager of the Southern Highlanders cooperative's retail store in Rockefeller Center, New York. Although she urged mountaineers to "use originality" in producing their goods, she also sent them sketches for potential objects, styles, and colors—suggestions, she noted, that at times struck the craftspeople as "very queer" (pp. 156–57).

The mountaineers themselves, while less in evidence than the folk revivalists in *Selling Tradition*, nonetheless speak powerfully. Becker shows that they, like their promoters, usually had little difficulty in seeing craftwork as an economic endeavor, one driven (often brutally so) by contemporary exigencies. J. Clarence White, a weaver, worked on handlooms in a factory-style production system at Biltmore Industries in Asheville, North Carolina. He characterized weaving as "wearisome work," one that he pursued only because it yielded higher wages than firing boilers, his job of choice (p. 125). A bedspread tufter exclaimed, "It's the hardest work I ever did do." "I start as early as I can and work as hard as I can, and I'm not doing it for pleasure," another added. "We like the money we make, that's all" (p. 149). Indeed, the Southern Highlanders cooperative does not seem to have had much difficulty finding mountaineers willing to follow its design and marketing advice: the cooperative, Becker notes, "estimated that its efforts culminated in fifty new styles, designs, and products" (p. 194).

Certainly there were mountaineers who declined to adjust their work to the market, and others, no doubt, refused to sell their crafts at all. Becker points out that workers "sometimes refused to duplicate any design with precision or declined to submit to prescribed delivery times" (p. 163). Overall, however, *Selling Tradition* leaves one struck primarily by how self-consciously both the mountaineers and the promoters of their goods mused about the market. Once and for all, their statements bring home a key point of Becker's—that the image of mountaineers as an isolated, pre-modern breed was a cultural construction, one largely divorced from economic reality.

But here one confronts a puzzle. Most of the actors in Becker's story see craftwork as a market-driven production, not as a nostalgic leisure activity—the mountaineers themselves, their distributors and salesmen, the federal government (as represented in the Southern Highlands cooperative and the Women's Bureau), and even, to a great extent, the Southern Highland guild of crafts-

<sup>3</sup> Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (1937; reprint, New York: Dover, 1973).



people. If this was the situation in the 1930s, how has the idyllic image of craftwork managed to survive, even thrive, up to the present day? Becker's narrative stops short of accounting for the staying power of the flawed cultural construction she identifies. Her last chapter does offer some marvelous examples of the mountain myth being set forth in 1930s advertisements and museum exhibits, but it does not directly address the question of why these depictions won out. Why did the combined forces of government policymakers, economic advocates, and social reformers fail to predominate in the realm of culture? Or, as in the case of settlement schools, how were these forces able to enact "modernizing" schemes *in the name of* "old-time" culture? Why did the facts of the mountaineers' harsh daily lives and desperate economic opportunism make hardly a dent in the way the American middle class saw and, to a great extent, *sees* them?

Fundamentally, these are questions of public memory—of how popular conceptions of the past are shaped and transmitted. For all of Becker's subtlety in exploring the marketing of tradition, this realm is one that she does not fully elaborate. To do so would likely have involved extending her story significantly beyond the 1930s to include how the mountain myth has been transmitted up to the present. In one sense, it may be unfair to ask for material beyond the scope of the project as Becker has defined it. Yet both "folk" and "tradition," the key terms in Becker's study, are decidedly temporal concepts: to understand fully how they have played out (and have been played up), one must see how they have moved across geographical, class-based, and generational divides over time.

In a similar way, Becker's discussion of the politics of folk revivalism leaves one wishing for more explicit connections to the present. Throughout *Selling Tradition*, she demonstrates that the work of cultural preservation and production is inherently politicized. Becker's own political stance relative to this material, however, emerges only indirectly, through her critiques of the cultural workers she studies. *Selling Tradition* has no heroes—no positive models for how outsiders *should* have handled folk crafts. The book does not directly identify villains either, but a closer look shows they are not in short supply. Between the lines, Becker criticizes her subjects for pushing the mountaineers to take a modern, capitalistic approach to their work. "Rather than educating mountain craft producers about their own cul-

tural traditions," she writes, "Southern Highlanders hoped to train them as business-savvy men and women" (p. 108). Likewise, the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) plan for a national handicraft organization "minimized the individual producers' control over the production and marketing of their own crafts. [It] offered no alternatives—and no threat—to the relationship and controls created by industrial capitalism; [it] simply sought a way to fit craft production into such structures" (p. 119). Reformers at the WPA, Department of Agriculture, and TVA "believed that they could reduce poverty among the region's farm families through rational planning. . . . They reinterpreted and tried to reorganize craftwork along lines more suited to industrial production than cultural tradition" (p. 123). Leaders of the Southern Highland guild and Southern Highlanders cooperative "admired the craft producer who accommodated their concerns and demands [for new designs that would sell in New York]. . . . Evidence suggests that some mountain craftspeople may have challenged such infringements on their cultural autonomy and occupational independence" (pp. 156–57).

This is loaded language, perhaps misleadingly so, since the bulk of the evidence Becker provides suggests that the mountaineers were determined to do what it took to make as much money as possible from their craftwork. More important, these passages suggest a critique that reaches well beyond the individual accountability of any single reformer, program, or government policy: it extends to an attack on capitalism itself. Even though I share much of Becker's anger and sorrow at capitalism's inequities and amoralities, I found myself resisting this aspect of her analysis—largely, I think, because her critique remains implicit instead of head-on. One gets the sense from Becker that the fools should have known better. Should they have? Is it so simple? Not everyone, surely, can be expected to battle capitalism; and if authors do impose this expectation on the past, then they need to explore historical alternatives as well. Were the reformers and businesspeople just supposed to leave the mountaineers alone? Becker herself has shown convincingly that the mountaineers had not been "alone" in that sense for generations.

*Selling Tradition* does not directly address these issues. Certainly Becker cannot be expected to solve Appalachian poverty. Nor can we ask her to work out conclusively the many dilemmas inherent in folk revivalism—how to preserve folk cul-

ture without freezing it, to win a place for it in "mainstream" American culture without diluting it. These issues have entangled generations of economists, social workers, anthropologists, and folklorists, many of them very well meaning. Becker could, however, acknowledge directly the thorniness of the problems these cultural workers faced. Whisnant does just this in the afterword to his *All That Is Native and Fine*. Although Whisnant certainly is highly critical of the cultural interventionists he studies, he provides more of a context for these criticisms. In part, this context is historical. Whisnant notes parallels between his tale of cultural encounter in twentieth-century Appalachia and the relationship between seventeenth-century Englishmen and American Indians in Virginia. Likewise, he extends his discussion of mountain culture to the present day, noting that even though contemporary settlement-school workers are diligent, well-intentioned, and self-conscious, they still fall prey to many of the same cultural traps as their predecessors. Whatever the sins of the earlier generations of cultural workers, Whisnant shows, they were not the first or last to commit them. Similarly, Whisnant's afterword suggests a philosophical context for his critiques. Unlike Becker, he depicts cultural mediation as not only slippery and potentially dastardly but also as timeless and unavoidable: "Cultural intervention," he writes, "is . . . a process which must be comprehended not only as an important element of the cultural history of one region in one period, but as a little understood feature of every cultural past, an inevitable component of every cultural present and future."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Whisnant offers a refreshingly personal context for his analysis. He suggests his own grappling with these issues: "I come to the end of this [story] amazed by the very plasticity and malleability of culture in the mountains." Moreover, he offers his criticisms directly and acknowledges his subjectivity. At one point he grants that "cultural intervenors may be on the whole decent, well-meaning, even altruistic people," admitting that "one may reasonably display great charity for the cross-purposes, confusions, and miscalculations of fallible individuals in difficult circumstances." But he concludes that his subjects merit censure: "Insofar as . . . people actively intervene in the cultural (or other) lives of large numbers of people, their failures and miscalculations, however 'understandable,' become a legiti-

mate object of public concern."<sup>5</sup> In his verdict, Whisnant comes down not far from Becker. His mode of criticism, though, is more forceful and, at the same time, more open about the subjectivity involved in evaluating the cultural acts of others. The result inspires the readers' trust and, implicitly, grants them more freedom to make their own evaluations of the dilemmas at hand.

As a work of cultural criticism, then, *Selling Tradition* has some limitations; but as a work of cultural history it remains an important accomplishment. To anyone who had assumed that crafts were simple expressions of a naive mountain folk culture, the book will offer a startling wake-up call. To anyone interested in the depression-era search for a true American culture, it will serve as a valuable companion to other works that address aspects of this subject. As I have suggested, readers eager to sort out the politics of culture at the broadest level will likely be left still searching. In the uncertain and ephemeral realm of culture, however, perhaps searching is the most appropriate stance after all.

BENJAMIN FILENE  
Minnesota Historical Society

**Steven Conn. *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926*.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. viii + 305 pp.; 27 illustrations, index. \$32.50.

*Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926*, a study of late nineteenth-century American museums, actually began as a dissertation on the museum world of Philadelphia: the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Commercial Museum, the University Museum of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Henry Mercer's idiosyncratic museum of industrial history in nearby Doylestown. Subsequently, author Steven Conn expanded his reach and scope by including comparative observations on contemporary and, to a degree, comparable museums elsewhere in the country. Thus, for example, his account of anthropology at the early University Museum, placed in the context of developments at the Field Museum in Chicago, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and (more briefly) the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, becomes a set of reflections on Ameri-

<sup>4</sup> Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, pp. 257, 263–64.