Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood


Alice Kane's childhood autobiography is, to quote editor Edith Fowke, a cornucopia of "...ballads, folk songs, popular songs, music-hall and pantomime songs, sea shanties, hymns, nursery rhymes, children's games, taunts and teases, riddles, recipes, poems, parodies, proverbs, jokes, sayings and customs" (p. 12). But it is not just all this, nor even a tribute to a prodigious memory; it also displays a mind, or minds, un fettered here by considerations of selectivity. Not only does the author freely admit to remembering in many cases only fragments of items, she includes much that is not considered “pure” folklore by would-be purists. Instead, every memorable ditty, from whatever source or time, which she knew, heard or used as a child, is included. It is therefore a most comprehensive survey of a child's repertoire; indeed, it is the only such survey with which I am familiar.

Alice Elizabeth Kane was born in Belfast in 1908; she moved with her family to Canada in 1921, on her thirteenth birthday. Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood records her memories of her first thirteen years, memories committed to print over sixty years later. The only caveat I would offer to folklorists would be to bear this in mind, as the author evokes childhood perspectives.

Yet the most interesting and valuable aspect of Alice Kane's memories is the very way in which she jolts the reader's memories, not just about folklore items, but about children's understanding and perception of such items: "Another song or rather hymn which is, I realize now, about Heaven, I always thought was a celebration of the joys of a nearby park called The Waterworks...

Come to that happy land,
Come, come away.
Why will you doubting stand?
Why still delay?

On then to glory run,
Be a crown and kingdom won,
And bright above the sun
Reign, reign for aye.

(I didn't understand why it rained above the sun.)"

Comments such as these are as pearls scattered throughout the work, for they provide insights into the relationship of children to their lore, insights which are infrequently collected.

Alice Kane indicates the many sources of her material, and the importance of each one. Her father and mother are especially rich in songs, sayings and rhymes, even though, in her mind, hers was not a particularly musical family. Many other relations, as well as schoolmates, provided her with memorable items, but it was her father especially who imprinted his tastes upon her. He was a mariner; how else to explain such a large number of nautical songs from a former children's librarian? A useful lesson may be drawn from this revelation: many people possess snippets of folklore from what appear to be the most unlikely, uncharacteristic traditions. The field collector should remember this (it was through remembering such a point that I was able to collect a small number of Child ballads, in English, from French Newfoundland singers).

The chapter headings, while evocative, are no clear guide to chapter content. While they follow a broadly chronological order, some are devoted to themes which cut across time. Chapter 7 presents items associated with the world of commerce; chapter 8 does the same for love and marriage; chapter 11 deals with nature, chapter 13 with war. These divisions are useful not so much for their thematic unity which is inevitably a somewhat artificial classification, as for the way in which they allow the author to recall her personal perceptions of items, fostering our understanding of childhood thinking. But thematic she provides many clues to the processes of variation and adaptation.

Edith Fowke's contribution, apart from a brief introduction which serves usefully to bring us up to date on Alice Kane's life, includes an important section of notes and references aimed mainly at identifying items. Indeed, she succeeds with some 350 out of 390 rhymed quotations listed in the Index. The notes also provide substantial bibliographical references to parallels; while not attempting to be exhaustive, Fowke nonetheless furnishes sufficient guides for the interested reader to pursue a thorough follow-up of particular items. Poten-
tial detectives may be able to help identify the small number of items for which an origin or source or parallel is not known. A most useful bibliography of some 160 titles, in which Irish items are distinguished, is complemented by a list of records cited; the scholarly apparatus is completed with a list of songs known by James Joyce, and an Index of Titles and First Lines.

This is a fascinating and informative evocation of childhood folklore and folklife. Herbert Halpert has always maintained that the best place to begin collecting folklore is with oneself; Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood illustrates his wisdom.

Gerald Thomas
Centre d'Etudes
Franco-Terrreuneviennes,
Memorial University of
Newfoundland