

*Life Flows On in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History.* By Robert V. Wells. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xiv, 245 pp. Cloth, \$65.00, ISBN 978-0-252-03455-8. Paper, \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-252-07650-3.)

Robert V. Wells, the Chauncey H. Winters Professor of History and Social Sciences at Union College, has combined his professional training in demographic history with his avocation as a folk musician to write a useful study of folk songs and their relevance to the broad narrative of the American past. *Life Flows On in Endless Song* compellingly explicates the connections between particular songs and their structural frameworks. For any teacher looking to enliven the traditional U.S. history survey course with musical examples, this book will serve as a rewarding guide.

Over the course of eight chapters, Wells investigates how songs resonated with changes in American family life, birth and mortality rates, migration patterns, transportation systems, urban development, rural life, religious practices, ideologies of individualism and community, and economic transformations from agricultural to industrial work. *Life Flows On in Endless Song* is full of examples that enrich our understanding of the aggregate forces that have transformed America since the colonial era. We learn about the details of dangerous work in logging camps (pp. 73–75); we hear about the yearnings and sorrows associated with migration and travel (pp. 121–46); and, in the book's strongest chapter, Wells describes how murder ballads such as "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight" yield insights into changing familial relationships, courtship patterns, gender roles, and ideas about love, sex, and death (pp. 14–16). In another of the book's best moments, Wells links the ballad "Wicked Polly" to the First Great Awakening and shows how the song resonated with the Puritan theology expressed in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards (pp. 41–42).

Wells tends to concentrate his analysis on lyrics, which makes for convincing connections of songs to historical settings, but he sometimes sacrifices a sense of the historical power of music as sound. When Wells does include analyses of musical form and performance style, his interpretations grow much more robust, as when he

describes the interplay between the rhythms and words of southern, African American work songs. With their steady pulse, Wells explains, these songs functioned to coordinate collective manual labor, but their lyrics often contained subtle expressions of protest against the very work that the music helped laborers complete. Only if you listen to both music and words can you grasp the historical significance of these songs (pp. 75, 77).

*Life Flows On in Endless Song* is written in a no-nonsense, straightforward style, but as no less a figure than Bob Dylan once remarked, "Folk music is the only music where it isn't simple. It's never been simple. It's weird." Sometimes Wells misses opportunities to probe the music's uncanny, surreal, contradictory, and even incoherent qualities in relation to history. After all, Americans have often sung to "root that mountain down" as much as to root themselves in their moment or place, to transcend or protest life as much as join its endless flow. Despite the lack of attention to the aesthetic richness of folk music, *Life Flows On in Endless Song* nonetheless effectively charts the reflective surfaces of America's deep river of musical expression. The book will aid future historians in navigating the channel of folk song that has cut through the American past.

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