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One purpose of this study has been to examine the fiction of Roark Bradford generally and briefly. The primary purpose, however, has been to look into Bradford's epic-novel John Henry in some detail. Particular attention has been paid to this book's relationship with the John Henry legend--to the similarities and differences involved, and to Bradford's alternate sources. It is concluded that John Henry, both book and character, are essentially composites of folk and literary elements and, finally, that the book has been singularly influential in popularizing the name of the legendary black steel driver.

ROARK BRADFORD AND JOHN HENRY

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by

Ferris Sands Hetherington III

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A Thesis Submitted to
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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

Roark Bradford was not a great writer; this much is fact. He did write some quaint things, some quaintly funny things, and even several first-rate things. But he never approached greatness, primarily because his characters circumscribed him. Their appeal ebbed too, obviously; few seem interested in old-time southern blacks these days. Bradford wrote ninety-six percent of his fiction about old-time southern blacks.¹ It is therefore not surprising that few people seem interested in him either.

The academic and literary communities have ignored Bradford with dedication. Five previous Master of Arts theses have been written about him, as well as the usual number of current reviews accorded any publishing author. There are some reminiscences about him in The Saturday Review, and there are a few brief obituaries. That is about all. In critical works there is precious little, and in scholarly journals there is nothing.

This is unfortunate, because Bradford happened to be a very good writer. He was limited in scope, but he was quite impressive in other ways. He was even a bit important if the truth be known.

I hope to make this apparent. I propose in any event a brief examination of Bradford and his fiction. Then I propose looking into

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¹Excluding nonfiction, Bradford wrote seven books, one play, and one hundred nine short stories. Six of the books, the play, and one hundred five of the stories are about old-time southern blacks.

one of his books in some detail. John Henry is an interesting book, and more people should know about it.

His full name was Roark Whitney Wyckliffe Bradford and he was born in 1896 on his father's plantation near the Mississippi River in Tennessee. There were twenty black families and one hundred fifty mules working on the plantation, and beginning with the mammy who nursed him, Bradford was exposed constantly to black people and their ways. He spent his boyhood close by the mules and cotton choppers, with his yellow hound Rattler and his three young black companions, Algie, Ed, and Sweet. He listened to the field hands' tales, joined in their social activities, and attended many a colorful sermon in Uncle Wes Henning's church. Needless to say, he learned a good deal about black society.

He eventually took a Bachelor of Laws degree at the University of California, then served in the army during World War I. Discharged in 1920, he began a newspaper career. He was a reporter for the Atlanta Georgian for about a year, and then there was the Lafayette, Louisiana Advertiser, where Bradford was managing editor, reporter, janitor, and various other things. He had always been one to hang about and swap tales with local blacks, and this period of his life was no exception. And when he took a job on the New Orleans Times-Picayune, he headed straight for Rampart Street, the river front, and the city's black belt where he continued to gather still more tales and more lore. He became an avid collector of black song recordings. He attended black church services and actually preached in some. And he eventually even bought his own plantation up near Shreveport--doubtless in order to be around the field hands more than to practice agriculture.

According to Marc Connelly, Bradford was "by nature a deeply compassionate man" who manifested a "Warmth and affection as deep as his sympathy for the Negroes' social and economic plight. . . ."2 According to his friend David Cohn, he "was of the small band of the pure in heart. In him were the simplicity, the directness of insight, the sense of wonder that belongs to the child and are so often lost in the man. Utterly without guile, profligate only in his generosity, he was a stranger to any form of mental or spiritual circumlocution."<3 Bradford died in 1948, and according to the Times-Picayune, "was a darned good fellow."<4

But long before his death, in 1926, to be exact, Bradford left the Picayune to write fiction.

His fiction is our immediate concern.

He published seven books, one play, and one hundred nine short stories. This took place from 1927 until 1949. Thirteen of the stories are collected in his Let the Band Play Dixie (1934), and one, "How Come Christmas," has been published singly in hardback (Harper & Brothers, 1930).5 The Green Roller is a book of black sermons in verse published posthumously in 1949.

²Marc Connelly, Voices Offstage (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1968), pp. 144, 149.

³David L. Cohn, "Straight to Heaven," The Saturday Review, 31 (4 December 1948), 20.

⁴Anonymous, "Roark Bradford," (New Orleans) Times-Picayune, 15 November 1948, p. 12.

⁵A complete listing of Bradford's stories can be found in Marjorie Adams, "Roark Bradford's Negro Characters," Texas, 1948, pp. 102-107. [M. A. thesis]

Of the seven books, four are legitimate novels. One is about white people and is not particularly distinguished. It deals with the so-called aristocratic families in Phinizy County, Tennessee, during the Civil War. It is a genial and readable thing, but is also rambling, poorly developed, and populated with stereotypes. Its name is The Three-Headed Angel, and it was published in 1937.

Kingdom Coming is first-rate. It is the story of a decent Louisiana slave boy named Telegram and of his progress to the Promised Land. Emancipation was not the heaven many expected, we find, at least not in Telegram's case. It took a Yankee firing squad to manage heaven for him.

Bradford tells the story in very human terms, and his empathy with his hero is impressive. The general credibility of characters and events created seventy years after the fact is even astonishing. Uncle Tom's Cabin is infinitely less believable. No novels about American slavery are more believable, regardless of when written.

If the book is flawed, it is due to the flatness of certain supporting characters (frequently a drawback with Bradford). One dimensional or not, though, they are interesting characters and suit the story admirably.

This Side of Jordan (1929) is also first-rate. It is an appealing tale about a black girl growing up among other blacks on a Louisiana plantation fifty years ago. It does contain a number of stock characters--an "old witch woman," for instance, and a naive, semiliterate preacher. But these characters are fleshed-out and human, and above all they are never dull. Aunt Crip the witch may in fact be more interesting

than Didge the heroine--and Didge is as human, rounded, individual, and realistic a character as one could wish for. She seems amazingly so if one remembers that she was created by a thirty-three year old white male ex-artillery officer.

The book's plot is tightly constructed, and its prose style has a classic, yet charming and warm quality:

Aunt Crip understood the bayou. Yes, Lord. And the canebrake too. She got all of her cures and wisdom and charms from the bayou and canebrake. Just how she got them no one but Aunt Crip knew, and she wasn't telling. All that the others knew about it was that she sat on the porch of her cabin or under the chinaberry tree in her yard and listened. Then she got up, went to the canebrake, and dug up roots or pulled herbs and put them away in her cabin to be used later for curing the sick or warding off spells of evil.

Aunt Crip knew the signs.⁶

A number of favorable things may be said about this style (and about Bradford's narration in general). It is readable and clear, certainly. And simple as its words and syntax are, its effect is quite resonant. "Aunt Crip knew the signs" is a homely enough little statement, for example, but it manages to suggest so much, to say so many things about an old woman and about an ethos. Also significant is the way the style suits the subject. It is itself down-to-earth and "folksy," and though not quite so grammatically "relaxed" as some southern speech, it still gives a flavor or hint of it. I refer to such particulars as the use of contractions ("wasn't"), the use of "folksy" expressions ("Yes, Lord"), and the liberal use of conjunctions ("cures and wisdom and charms" instead of "cures, wisdom, and charms," beginning

⁶Roark Bradford, This Side of Jordan (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), p. 3.

sentences with "and," etc). This "matching" of narration to dialogue is an effective device which Bradford uses elsewhere.

Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun (1928) and Ol' King David an' the Philistine Boys (1930) are difficult to assess by usual standards because there is nothing in the world quite like them. They are collections of Old Testament stories as these stories might have been retold from the point of view of uneducated southern blacks. Thus we have Creation when a heavenly fish fry becomes flooded and "de Lawd" needs a place to "dreen" the "firmament" (water) off to. Eve is created when "de Lawd" announces, "I ain't gonter have none of dese yar single mens workin' on my farm. They runs around wid de women all night and come de next day they's too sleepy to work."⁷ The serpent in Eden appears as "a great big highland moccasin,"⁸ apples are scarce and "de Lawd" expects their price to go up in the fall, and so on.

The stories were suggested largely by memories of Uncle Wes Henning in Tennessee and by a New Orleans preacher called the "Black Billy Sunday." They are very entertaining and very funny, at least to non-blacks. And they are invariably sympathetic, reverent, and sometimes quite touching. In "Crossing Jordan," there is this:

"Now when I swages de waters back so y'all kin cross," say de Lawd, "is y'all gonter run 'cross like a bunch of hawgs after cawn, or is y'all gonter march across like you had some manners and raisin'?"

"March 'cross, Lawd," say Moses. "We gonter take our time and march."

De Lawd looked at Moses. "Moses," he say, "dat's wrong. They gonter march, maybe, but not you."

⁷Bradford, Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), p. 5.

⁸Bradford, p. 6.

"How come, Lawd?" say Moses. "Ain't I de wawkin' boss?"

"Not no more, Moses," say de Lawd.

So Moses sot and studied and studied. "Well, Lawd," he say, "when you promise me somethin' good you always give hit to me. And when you promise somethin' bad, I ain't a man to kick about gettin' hit, too. I ain't forgot about busten all dem Ten Commandments on de calf's haid back yonder. You promise efn I busted 'em I couldn't git to de Promise' Land. And I busted ev'y one of 'em, Lawd. I ain't complainin'."

"Moses," say de Lawd, "I ain't holdin' dat ag'in' you. I ain't holdin' nothin' ag'in'you. And efn I could, I'd let you lead de Hebrew chilluns 'cross Jurdin. But I can't. Hit's a mighty mystery de way I got to run my yearth, and sometimes hit look like I'm bein' hard on my best people. But I ain't. Hit's jest part of de mystery."

"You's right, ev'y time, Lawd," say Moses.

"I ain't braggin,' but I ain't never been wrong yit," say de Lawd. "So, Moses, hit's jest like you say. You's gittin' along in de years. You done yo' do, and yo' time is out. Joshua is a young man and a good man. He ain't got as much sense as you, but he's got a heap more strenk. And I needs a leader wid a heap of strenk. So I'm makin' him my head man."

"Joshua ain't nobody's fool, too, Lawd," say Moses. "He got a heap of sense."

So ev'ybody jest sot, rockin, back and forth, lookin' 'cross de river. To finally Moses say, "Lawd, efn hit's all de same to you, I'll jest set and watch de Hebrew chilluns march past, and den I and de old lady will settle down and plant a little gyarden whare us kin set and look over Jurdin, even efn us can't cross.

So Moses sot, but about dat time somethin' caught him up and before he could bat his eye he was settin' in de middle of de air, and a cherub was lacin' golden slippers on his tired feet and angels was puttin' a white robe on his tired shoulders and de Lawd was puttin' a golden crown on his tired haid.

"Lawd," say Moses, "dis is mighty nice. Mighty nice. Thanky, Lawd."

"Moses," say de Lawd, "dis ain't de Promise' Land I promised Abraham's grandchildren, but hit's de Promise' Land for all good folks."

"Well, hit's mighty nice, Lawd," say Moses.⁹

Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun became the basis for Marc Connelly's play, The Green Pastures (1930).¹⁰ This play was extremely popular and

⁹Bradford, pp. 145-147.

¹⁰"The Green Pastures" is the title of the thirtieth story in Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun.

won a Pulitzer Prize. It contributed a dimension to Ol' Man Adam by bringing its stories together thematically to some extent. And there is no question that it is a very skillful dramatization. Bradford and Connelly complemented each other well. One might only wish that Bradford had gotten more of the eventual credit. Connelly's is the only name usually associated with the play these days.

The Old Testament stories (and The Green Pastures) do employ stereotypes. Most characters in them are stereotypes to some degree, and this, of course, is a tendency toward the superficial. Not to say that such devices are not useful in literature--Falstaff and Shylock are stereotypes--but really to succeed they need to have extra-stereotypical qualities. Falstaff, a miles gloriosus, is loyal and witty in addition, and Shylock argues that he will bleed if you prick him. Bradford's Old Testament characters usually lack such individuating characteristics, and this is a failing.

Another problem has to do with the humor. Take the story "Old Man Job" in Ol' Man Adam:

"Job is what I calls a good man," say de Lawd.
 "Say which, Lawd?" Hit was ole Satan standin' right by de Lawd.
 "Hey-ho, Satan!" say de Lawd. "I ain't seed you in a month of Sundays. How's Miz Satan and de gals?"
 "Finest kind, Lawd," say Satan. "How's all yo' folks?"¹¹

Delightful as this is, it is ludicrous humor. It is, more specifically, black ludicrousness seen through more sophisticated eyes. It entails ethnic condescension on the reader's part. We can laugh at Bradford's simple narrator and characters because we patronize them, in

¹¹Bradford, p. 203.

other words. If we were not in a position to do this, they would not appear ludicrous. We laugh at them for the same reason that we laugh at children--because children are less sophisticated than we are.

This is sociologically sad, but it is the way this humor works. It is, of course, the way much humor works--humor that is based on the "fall-guy" principle or principle of laughter at someone else's expense. Practical jokes and custard-pies-in-the-face are low forms of this principle; Bradford's characters are a higher form.

It must be said that Bradford is invariably sympathetic to his characters and never thinks to denigrate them. His position is rather that of an amused father. The pity is that American blacks had to be deprived socially and intellectually for his formula to work. Bradford did not do the depriving, certainly. And there is nothing fundamentally wrong with writing about quaint characters. The appeal of the Bible stories does feed upon a social evil, though, and perpetuates it, if anything, by showing its lighter side. It is funny material, very funny material, but it is sad in one sense that this is the case.

"How Come Christmas" is similar to the Old Testament stories. It is ludicrous, benignly condescending, stereotyped, well-written, sympathetic, and touching. It is the story of the birth of "de Poor Little Jesus" and of "old Sandy Claus," a private citizen. The latter, it seems, decides to "drap over" to "Miss Mary's" with a cradle gift because (1) he "ain't seed no chillun in so long . . . [he is] pyore hongry to lean . . . [his] eyes up agin a baby," and (2) "You got to

give a new baby somethin', or else you got bad luck."¹² So "old Sandy Claus" goes to "Miss Mary's" and he and "the Poor Little Jesus" hit it off right away. This impresses "de Lawd" (who also happens to be present), and so "de Lawd" passes a miracle and says, "Old Sandy Claus, live forever, and make my chilluns happy."¹³

So ev'y since dat day and time old Sandy Claus been clawin' de chilluns on Christmas, and dat's on de same day dat de Poor Little Jesus got bawnd. 'Cause dat's de way de Lawd runs things. O' cou'se de Lawd knowed hit wa'n't gonter be long before de Poor Little Jesus growed up and got to be a man. And when he done dat, all de grown fo'ks had him so's day c'd moan they sins away and lay they burdens down on him, and git happy in they hearts. De Lawd made Jesus for de grown fo'ks. But de Lawd know de chilluns got to have some fun too, so dat's how come hit's Sandy Claus and Christmas and all.¹⁴

The first of the one hundred nine short stories, "Cooter," was published in 1927 by Mystery Magazine. The last, "Butter Paddle," appeared in Collier's in 1946. Most of the others are in Collier's, and only four lack black characters. It is difficult to generalize further about them because, like Bradford's books, they differ so much from each other. Some are sentimental and some are funny. Some are whimsical and some are tall tales. Some, like Ol' Man Adam, are fantastic, and others, like Kingdom Coming or This Side of Jordan, are realistic. Some are tragic and some are brilliant. Some are poor and some are good.

¹²Bradford, How Come Christmas (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), pp. 14, 16.

¹³Bradford, p. 20.

¹⁴Bradford, pp. 21-22

Except for four, though, they are all about black people, usually lower-class Louisiana black people. Narrative style and dialect are very well done. They tend to use fewer stereotypes than some of the books. And simply by being short, they avoid the disjointedness of, for example, The Three-Headed Angel. They are a good lot of stories, and worth looking into, as are Bradford's other things.

So much, then, for these very brief general notes. Bradford's short stories are very good for the most part. His Old Testament sketches are funny, warm, patronizing, stereotyped, and well-written. The Green Pastures is almost great¹⁵ but owes some of this to Marc Connelly. Kingdom Coming and This Side of Jordan are superior. The Three-Headed Angel is not. The Green Roller I have been unable to obtain, and John Henry, well, John Henry is something else again. It is tragic and funny and flawed, and it is in some ways the most interesting thing Bradford has done. It may be the most important.

¹⁵With the reservations applicable to the Bible stories.

CHAPTER II

John Henry's a legend,
 But once he was a man.
 He worked, and loved, and died.
 This is his story.

So begins Josh White's phonograph record, The Story of John Henry: A Musical Narrative.¹⁶ I would like to use the words as the briefest outline for the remainder of this essay. I propose, that is, to examine the legend and see what it says; to see, for one thing, whether John Henry really was a man. Then I would like to comment on what Bradford has done with the legend. I would like to tell his story's story, if I may.

According to Richard Dorson, it was not until 1909 that scholars paid any attention to the John Henry ballad.¹⁷ Then, in that year, it received slight mention in the Journal of American Folklore. A collector of folk songs named Louise Bascom, it seems, had sent in this two-line fragment:

Johnie Henry was a hard-workin' man,
 He died with his hammer in his hand.

"Her informant," says Dorson, "declared the [entire] ballad to be sad, tearful and sweet, and hoped to secure the rest 'when Tobe sees

¹⁶Electra, EKL-123. The words are by Bradford, the music by Jacques Wolfe.

¹⁷Richard M. Dorson, "The Career of 'John Henry,'" Western Folklore, 24 (July 1965), 155-163.

Tom, an' gits him to larn him what he ain't forgot of hit from Muck's pickin.'"18

Tobe apparently never saw Tom, says Dorson, but the stanza did create interest among other collectors. In the next several years, the Journal published a number of articles about the ballad, and in 1913 E. C. Perrow printed four fragments of the hammer song and the first complete ballad text. He observed that workmen on southern railroads seemed to know a great deal of verse about John Henry, the legendary steel-driving man.¹⁹ Then, in 1915, John Lomax published eleven stanzas of the ballad which he said were sung along the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia and Kentucky.²⁰ So the scholars had discovered John Henry.

Throughout the 1920's, variations of the ballad were collected, studied, and discussed. And during this time, two scholars decided independently to conduct the definitive study of the John Henry phenomenon. What, exactly, did the legend say? Where did the event or events supposedly take place? Did they take place? And, of course, did John Henry really exist?

One of the scholars was Guy Johnson, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina. The other, Louis Chappell, was an English professor at the University of West Virginia. Johnson's study,

¹⁸Louise Rand Bascom, "Ballads and Songs of Western North Carolina," Journal of American Folklore, 22 (1909), 219.

¹⁹E. C. Perrow, "Songs and Rhymes from the South," Journal of American Folklore, 26 (1913), 163-165.

²⁰John Lomax, "Some Types of American Folk-Song," Journal of American Folklore, 28 (1915), 14.

John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend, appeared in 1929.²¹ Chappell's book, John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study, did not come out until 1933.²² The two works reached essentially the same conclusions. And since Bradford's John Henry predated Chappell's study by two years, I propose to refer to Johnson primarily.

In 1926, Johnson did not believe John Henry existed. He liked the songs about him and thought him "none the less real as a vivid picture and example of the good man hero of the race." But he still considered him "most probably a mythical character."²³

Then he began his study of the legend. When he had finished, he was able to write:

I have imposed upon numerous Negro acquaintances in one way or another; I have importuned strangers to tell me what they knew about John Henry; I have held John Henry contests in dozens of Negro schools and colleges; I have benefited by the good will of Negro editors and have sought John Henry data by means of stories, contests, and advertisements in the Negro press. I have also drawn upon numerous white people, especially in my investigations at Big Bend Tunnel.²⁴

Johnson was thorough. He gathered a flood of letters, statements, and songs whose very volume indicated how widespread the John Henry tradition had become. All the variations and inconsistencies

²¹Guy B. Johnson, John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929).

²²Louis W. Chappell, John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study (Jena: Frommannsche Verlag Walter Biedermann, 1933).

²³Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, Negro Workaday Songs (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926).

²⁴Johnson, p. vii.

associated with popular legend were there, especially in the narrative accounts. But Johnson did discover some stability. Most of the blacks he interviewed did agree that (1) John Henry was a steel driver who (2) died in a railroad tunnel after beating a steam drill in a contest to make holes for explosives. The evidence also tended to fall into one of two groups. The first indicated the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia as the place where the event occurred. The other group placed the scene somewhere in northeastern Alabama.

Alabama was discarded for lack of any objective evidence. The Big Bend Tunnel, however, had received the vote of three-fourths of those Johnson interviewed. Not only that, but so many John Henry ballads began with basically this stanza:

John Henry was a little boy,
Sitting on his mammy's knee,
Said, "The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. and O. Road
Is going to be the death of me,
Going to be the death of me."²⁵

Johnson went to the Big Bend Tunnel area and began interviewing the older residents.²⁶ His task was frustrating. "What a pity," he wrote, "that someone did not make an investigation at Big Bend ten or fifteen years ago!"

²⁵Johnson, p. 26.

²⁶Officially named Great Bend Tunnel, it is nine miles east of Hinton and one mile west of Talcott in Summers County, W. Va. It was in use at least as late as 1953, according to B. A. Botkin and Alvin Harlow, eds., A Treasury of Railroad Folklore: The Stories, Tall Tales, Traditions, Ballads and Songs of the American Railroad Man (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1953).

Even five years ago would have made a great difference in the richness of the data available. On every hand people said, "You should have come a few years sooner. Why, just last year old man B----- died, and he was a man who could have told you the truth about this if anybody could." All but a few of those who were in a position to know the details about John Henry in their youth have passed on or are now too feeble in memory to reconstruct the things which might once have been well known to them.²⁷

Johnson conducted many interviews and could pin nothing down. Three old men claimed to have seen John Henry, and one claimed to have seen the contest. Their statements were inconsistent, though, and interviews with other residents took Johnson no closer to a definite answer. Documentary evidence was completely lacking.

So nothing was proved. Certain strong probabilities were established, however: (1) that there was a black steel driver named John Henry at the Big Bend Tunnel construction site in the early 1870's, (2) that he contested with a steam drill in a test of the machine, and (3) that he died soon after the contest, possibly from fever. Evidence also suggested that there was a woman involved.

Louis Chappell's study concluded similarly: "That the John Henry tradition is factually based seems too obvious now for serious doubt," he wrote.

The man in the case, notwithstanding what his real name was, or what became of him, was known at Big Bend as John Henry, and is still remembered by a few who are certain of his existence, and of his activity there. Moreover, every circumstance bearing on the matter favors the reality of his contest with the machine, and of his association with a nebulous character called the freckled beauty.²⁸

²⁷Johnson, p. 33.

²⁸Chappell, p. 92.

So this much of the tradition is very probably true. And this is probably all that will be discovered. Johnson and Chappell have investigated the known sources exhaustively.

But truth is not the important thing in this case. If the story were proved true, it would only establish a trivial instance of human pride and the fallibility of nineteenth century mining machinery. The important thing is the legend itself--the legend as a work of art and, as Johnson puts it, "a living, functioning thing in the folk life of the Negro."²⁹

I marvel [he says] that some of the "new" Negroes with an artistic bent do not exploit the wealth of John Henry lore. Here is material for an epic poem, for a play, for an opera, for a Negro symphony. What more tragic theme than the theme of John Henry's martyrdom?³⁰

Now, after forty-five years, the legend lives and functions in a broader context than the folk life of the Negro. Roark Bradford was not a "new Negro," but he was primarily responsible for this.

²⁹Johnson, p. 54.

³⁰Johnson, p. 150.

CHAPTER III

Bradford published his John Henry in 1931. From 1927 until that time, he published three other books, three articles, and twenty-nine short stories. It is therefore unlikely that John Henry was begun before 1930.

Bradford could have used several sources. One was Johnson's monograph. The songs were another. Several collections of these songs existed, notably one undertaken by Johnson himself with Howard Odum in 1926.³¹ Bradford probably relied on oral tradition for the most part, though. In a letter to Norval Richardson, he states that his story came from "yarns" he had heard.³² If he borrowed from songs, it is reasonable to assume that these came from the same place. Another most essential source had to be his own intimate knowledge of lower Mississippi area black people.

Bradford took many things, in any case, and wove his book from them. He used elements from white folklore. He used black songs not connected with John Henry. He used other black folk characters. And he altered the traditional story by making a woman its central issue. Bradford's John Henry is "not the John Henry of the legend," Johnson wrote.

³¹Odum and Johnson.

³²Rupert Norval Richardson, Jr., "Roark Bradford: An Analysis of His Works and Technique," Texas, 1941, p. 180. [M. A. thesis] Letter from Bradford to Richardson, dated 15 November 1940.

His is a jazz version, so to speak, adapted to a lower Mississippi River setting. The old John Henry was a tragic, almost sacred, figure. He symbolized man versus the machine. This new John Henry is a tragic personality also, but insofar as he symbolizes anything it is man versus woman. True, he meets his death in a contest with a machine as did John Henry of old, but the parallelism does not extend much beyond that fact.³³

Bradford's book and main character are composites. What went into these composites I propose to look into in some detail. First, though, a synopsis of the book is needed:

Now John Henry was a man, but he's long dead. The night John Henry was born the moon was copper-colored and the sky was black. The stars wouldn't shine and the rain fell hard. Forked lightning cleaved the air and the earth trembled like a leaf. The panthers squaled in the brake like a baby and the Mississippi River ran upstream a thousand miles. John Henry weighed forty-four pounds.

John Henry was born on the banks of the Black River, where all good rousterbouts come from. He came into the world with a cotton-hook for a right hand and a river song on this tongue:

"Looked up and down de river,
Twice as far as I could see.
Seed befo' I gits to be twenty-one,
De Anchor Line gonter b'long to me, Lawd, Lawd,
Anchor Line gonter b'long to me."

They didn't know what to make of John Henry when he was born. They looked at him and then went and looked at the river.

"He got a bass voice like a preacher," his mamma said.

"He got shoulders like a cotton-rollin' rousterbout," his papa said.

"He got blue gums like a conjure man," the nurse woman said.

"I might preach some," said John Henry, "but I ain't gonter be no preacher. I might roll cotton on de boats, but I ain't gonter be no cotton-rollin' rousterbout. I might got blue gums like a conjure man, but I ain't gonter git familiar wid de sperits. 'Cause my name is John Henry, and when fo'ks call me by my name, dey'll know I'm a natchal man."

"His name is John Henry," said his mamma. "Hit's a fack."

"And when you calls him by his name," said his papa, "he's a natchal man."³⁴

³³Johnson, "A Mighty Legend," The Nation, 133 (7 October 1931), 367.

³⁴Bradford, John Henry (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), pp. 1-2.

So it begins. By the end of another page and a half, the infant has consumed four ham bones, a pot of cabbages, a bait of turnip greens, a side of "middlin'," a pone of corn bread, some hot potliquor, two hog jowls, a kettle of whippoorwill peas, a skillet of biscuits, a jug of cane molasses, and left home to see the world. He has reached maturity by page five, needless to say.

He takes a series of jobs. He "rousts" cotton and hogs on a riverboat. He teaches plantation hands the way to pick cotton. And he gets the Yellow Dog Railroad built before the sun can go down. In each episode a problem exists, and John Henry tells the people involved how to solve it. He ends a pork shortage, for example, by locating hogs and knowing the way to load them. He is a teacher as well as a strongman, then, as these opening episodes demonstrate.

He is also a consummate braggart:

"Well, John Henry," said the driver, "my name is Copperhaid, and I'm de he-coon on de Big Jim White. And hit takes a natchal man to roll cotton for me!"

"Efn I ain't a natchal man," said John Henry, "you show me a natchal man, and I'll mock him."³⁵

Or:

". . . stand back, you babies, and watch old John Henry roust dese hogs. I'm f'm de Black River country whar de sun don't never shine! So stand back, you field hands, whilst I rousts dese hogs outn de pen! Line up, you bullies, and make yo' shoulders bare! 'Cause when I h'ists dese hogs outn de pen, you gonter think hit's rainin' hogs on yo' weary back. Line up, you clodhoppers and git ready to wawk away. 'Cause my name is John Henry and I'm six foot tall!"³⁶

³⁵Bradford, p. 8.

³⁶Bradford, p. 18.

He goes to New Orleans and beats a gambler at his own game.

Then he looked up and down the street. Ane when he looked up and down the street he saw a woman named Julie Anne. She looked at John Henry and then she looked at Ruby and Delia but she didn't say a silent word. She sang:

"John Henry was so big and tall,
I reckon he was a man,
He comed to de city and he got dressed up,
And he seed poor Julie Anne, Lawd, Lawd,
Den he seed poor Julie Anne."³⁷

He takes up with Julie Anne, is arrested for vagrancy, then becomes fireman on the Red Ball freight train bound for Memphis.

He meets Poor Selma there. This is a whore-lady who claims she has a "stinger-ree" and cannot be quit. John Henry quits her, though, "like he was walking away from a job of work."³⁸

He faces down Stacker Lee, the black desperado, but then finds he has to visit his old witch woman to have Poor Selma's "stinger-ree" removed. This means trouble because, as the old woman says, "Ev'y time you gris gris somethin' off, . . . well, you turn right around and gris gris somethin' else on."³⁹ The something else is trouble with Julie Anne.

When John Henry gets back to New Orleans, Sam has come upon the domestic scene. John Henry throws him out of Julie Anne's window. He "rousts" his way upriver then, and takes Julie Anne with him, but he catches her with Sam again on the boat. He drives spikes on the Yellow

³⁷Bradford, p. 48.

³⁸Bradford, p. 82.

³⁹Bradford, p. 48.

Dog Railroad and beats Sam at it, but Sam runs off with Julie Anne later in the day.

This troubles John Henry. "Who ain't much around de gals?" he protests.

". . . Man, I kin git more women den I can handle, and dat's sayin' a heap. I had Ruby and Delia and Julie Anne, and I up and quit Poor Selma. I gits me a woman and den I quits, and den I gits me another."

"You might er quit Poor Selma," said the driver, "but Julie Anne quit you, 'cause I kin see you grievin' in yo' heart, and you know dat's de natchal."⁴⁰

John Henry returns to New Orleans and takes up with Julie Anne again. But the infidelity persists. He tries gin and cocaine but this does no good. Still infidelity. Finally, he goes to Hell-buster's church and is saved; then he leaves Julie Anne for good.

At the waterfront he asks for a job "rousting," but finds that a steam winch is now employed for the purpose. He races the steam winch, holds his own, and dies at sundown. The winch wins by default, we must assume, although this detail is underplayed.

Hell-buster Henry had on a long black coat the day he preached John Henry's funeral. The Old Ship of Zion Church was full to the doors and all the women were crying. Six tall men brought John Henry in and put him down by the altar. Six more men came marching down, toting his nine-pound hammer. And six more came walking down the aisle, but they couldn't find his cotton hook. Then six young women, all wearing veils, came in and stood beside him.

"How come y'all ladies moanin' so?" Hell-buster asked the women.

So the women stepped out, one by one, and each one spoke her lines:

"I comed hyar all dressed in red,
'Cause I hyared John Henry's dead."

"I comed hyar all dressed in green,
'Cause he's de best man I ever seen."

⁴⁰Bradford, p. 165.

"I comed hyar all dressed in blue,
'Cause I loved John Henry true,"

"I comed hyar all dressed in gray,
'Cause Cold Death tuck my man away."

"I comed hyar all dressed in yaller,
'Cause John Henry quit Poor Selma."⁴¹

The sixth woman is Poor Selma herself, and she expresses her own devotion for the departed. "A thousand niggers from the Yellow Dog railroad" sing a song of his prowess.⁴² Likewise a thousand river "rousterbouts." Everyone has his say, and then the inevitable Sam enters carrying Julie Anne's corpse. She has died, it develops, rolling cotton with John Henry's cotton hook.

Then "all the niggers from the Yellow Dog railroad and all the rousters from the Big Jim White, and all the moaning women stood up and sang a song:

'John Henry had him a pretty little wife,
And her name was Julie Anne.
She picked up de hook John Henry laid down,
She rolled cotton like a natchal man, Lawd, Lawd,
And she died wid his hook in her hand."⁴³

It is a good book. It is far from being great or even flawless, but it is still interesting, sad, and funny, and even manages some humanity and realism, in spite of what sometimes seem efforts to the contrary. It is generally well put together too.

It is particularly interesting in terms of the various elements that have gone into it. Let us examine some of these.

⁴¹Bradford, pp. 217-218.

⁴²Bradford, p. 219.

⁴³Bradford, pp. 223-224.

First there are the obvious variations on the "historical" John Henry. The setting and culture are of the lower Mississippi and not West Virginia. Bradford wrote that he had known of several versions of the legend--railroading versions, versions involving rock quarries, levee-building, lumber camps, and so on--but that he used the "cotton rolling" (lower Mississippi) version simply because he knew it best.⁴⁴

"Where any specific idea came from I do not know," he wrote. "No doubt most of them were variations on tales I had heard, although I have had my moments of being able to invent a tale or two myself."⁴⁵

So we are given a series of mighty episodes instead of a single unifying one. The steam drill becomes a steam winch, and the contest is downgraded to almost incidental importance. (And John Henry does not even win it.)

Julie Anne becomes the story's motive force.⁴⁶ This much is Bradford's invention. The way the lady manages it, however, does have its legendary roots. There is the business about working:

John Henry had a little woman,
Her name was Julie Ann;
John Henry took sick on his work one day,
An' Julie Ann drove steel like a man, Lawd, Lawd.⁴⁷

⁴⁴In Richardson, p. 180. Letter from Bradford to Richardson, dated 15 November 1940.

⁴⁵In Richardson, p. 184. Letter from Bradford to Richardson, dated 26 February 1941.

⁴⁶Traditionally known as Julie Ann, Polly Ann, Mary Ann, Martha Ann, Nellie Ann, Lizzie Ann, and Mary Magdalene.

⁴⁷Odum and Johnson, p. 227.

But there is also this:

Up stepped girl John Henry loved,
 She throwed up her hands and flew,
 She 'clare to God,
 "John Henry, I been true to you."

"O where did you get yo' new shoes from,
 O dat dress dat you wear so fine?"
 "I got my shoes from a railroad man,
 My dress from a driver in de mine."

John Henry had a little wife,
 Dress she wore was blue,
 An' she declare to God,
 "I always been true to you."⁴⁸

Other John Henry songs contain similar stanzas, and Bradford has simply expanded on these for his central idea. It is a good ploy, too, because it lends some cohesion to an otherwise rather disjointed series of episodes. It provides a motive force for much of the action, and a good deal of action in its own right. Infidelity is the subject of seven episodes, and it brings about several others. Why, indeed, would a man work himself to death in a cotton rolling contest? Pride and economics are involved, certainly, but these are not convincing reasons. Add woman trouble to them and they become more nearly so. Add woman trouble, and an otherwise farfetched incident becomes tragedy.

It is true that this incident might have been more dramatic. The reader is not prepared for it, for one thing. And it would have helped had John Henry been allowed to win. A black David versus an

⁴⁸Odum and Johnson, p. 226.

industrial Goliath is the basis for the very dramatic John Henry ballad, and Bradford should have exploited this.⁴⁹

These are the main variations on the Big Bend story--the lower Mississippi setting, the rampant infidelity, the victorious steam winch. The change in setting is a relatively trivial thing and certainly justified in terms of Bradford's background. His bringing Julie Anne to the fore is essential to his book. The cotton rolling contest I submit, though, was a mistake, for several reasons. Bradford could have used the Alabama drilling version without violating his unity of place, and without sacrificing the drama which he did.

These are the changes; the rest are additions. And since John Henry amounts to a book made from a ballad, these additions are essential rather than incidental.

Some of the additions are other legendary or semi-legendary characters like Stacker Lee (Stackalee, Stackerlee, Stagolee). This is the black badman who, legend says, shot one Billy Lyon in a bar in Memphis (or St. Louis) for stealing his "magic Stetson." Stacker Lee had sold his soul to the Devil for this hat because it enabled him to assume various shapes, to walk barefoot on hot slag, and to eat fire. Eventually he got too ornery even for the Devil, whereupon the latter caused him to lose his hat by way of Billy Lyon, and ultimately to burn in hell.

⁴⁹John Henry "symbolized man versus the machine," wrote Johnson, p. 367. The Biblical allusion I have taken from Botkin and Harlow, eds., p. 420.

John Henry catches up with him in Argenta (near Memphis):

"You's awful little and squinchy," said John Henry.

"Little," said Stacker Lee, "but loud." And he shot John Henry's necktie off. [And his shoestrings, coat buttons, and hatband.]

"You gonter keep on wid dat shootin'," said John Henry, "to de fust thing you know you gonter git me ondressed. And when I gits ondressed I gits bad."

"I likes 'em bad," said Stacker Lee, and he shot John Henry's belt off.

[A fight breaks out between their two women and Stacker Lee stops to watch.]

"Hit's one more shot in yo' gun," said John Henry.

"Hit is," said Stacker Lee, but he kept on watching the women fight.

"Maybe," said John Henry, "efn you laid me low you wouldn't need to put my shoestrings back in my shoes."

"I puts 'em back," said Stacker Lee. "I puts back de buttons and de tie and de hatband and de belt, too, 'cause I ain't got time to play wid you now. I'm watchin' dese ladies fight."

"Naw you ain't, bad Stacker Lee," said John Henry. "You's watchin' yo' liver turn upside down. Now gimme dat gun, you bad man, and gimme yo' watch and chain, 'cause you might be bad amongst de womenfo'ks, but you ain't so bad amongst me." And John Henry reached over and slapped bad old Stacker Lee just one time and he fell into the river.

"Crawl outn de river, you shovel-bill cat," said John Henry, "and I'll smack you in again!" And he slapped Stacker Lee back into the river. "You's powerful bad wid yo' talk and yo' gun, but you ain't so bad wid me." And he slapped Stacker Lee so hard that it dried out his clothes.

"Now," said John Henry, "I'm gonter sing you a song dat you can't hear, and you don't know what hit means." So he sang him that bad John Henry song:

"Stacker Lee was a bad man,
Twice as bad as he could be.
Shot his woman wid a forty-four gun,
But he wouldn't take a shot at me, Lawd, Lawd.
And he wouldn't take a shot at me.⁵⁰

John Hardy is another legendary black figure. The actual man was hanged for murder in West Virginia in 1894 and was himself an

⁵⁰Bradford, pp. 86-87, 88-89.

excellent steel driver. He has often been confused with John Henry, as he is in the following:

John Hardy was a bad, bad man,
He came from a bad, bad land;
He killed two men in a Shawnee camp,
Cause he's too damn nervy for to run, God damn!
Too damn nervy for to run.

John Hardy went to the rock quarrie,
He went there for to drive, Lord, Lord!
The rock was so hard and the steel so soft,
That he laid down his hammer and he cried,
"O my God!"
He laid down his hammer and he cried.

John Henry was standing on my right-hand side,
The steel hammers on my left, Lord, Lord!
"Before I'd let the steamer beat me down,
I'd die with my hammer in my hand, by God!
I'd die with my hammer in my hand."⁵¹

As Guy Johnson points out, the first stanza is a John Hardy stanza, the second is typically John Henry but uses John Hardy's name, and the third is John Henry with John Henry's name.

Bradford does not confuse the two. John Hardy appears as his New Orleans card sharp:

. . . John Henry stood up and jumped on top of the table. "John Hardy," he said, "I didn't see you pa'm no cyards, and you didn't see me pa'm no cyards. And we bofe went out on our deals. So dat makes us even."

"I didn't know you was a gamblin'-man," said John Hardy. . . . "Le's be friends, me and you? What you say?"

"I ain't no gamblin'-man," said John Henry, "but I kin mock de man which is." And he reached down and picked up the four dollars that were on the table.⁵²

⁵¹Johnson, John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend, p. 65.

⁵²Bradford, pp. 43-44.

Blind Lemon [Jefferson] is probably the best-known blind blues singer of this century. He appears several times to sing his one-line song to John Henry:

"I love you, woman, but I don't like yo' low-down ways."⁵³

Another character Bradford uses is "old Jay Gould," né Jason Gould, 1836-92, the famous railroad executive and financier. He owns the Red Ball freight that John Henry fires to Memphis before the sun goes down.⁵⁴

Another is "old man Billie Bob Russell," the man in charge of building the Yellow Dog Railroad. He was not nationally known, but was noted as a construction foreman in Georgia.⁵⁵

Bradford injects famous things into his story as well as famous characters. There is the "Big Jim White," for example, the riverboat John Henry "rousts" on. No boat could have been more suitable for such a hero, since it happened to be the most heroic packet the river ever saw. Finished in 1878, and actually the J. M. White III, it was the fastest ever on its lower Mississippi run, the most beautiful anywhere, the most elegant, and one of the largest. "No one ever knew just how fast the new White could go," writes one historian. "Engineers seemed to fear to open her up full speed as she might with her gigantic wheels sweep all the water out of the river."⁵⁶

⁵³Bradford, pp. 172, 189, and 200.

⁵⁴Bradford, Chapter IX.

⁵⁵Odom and Johnson, p. 53; Bradford, Chapters V, XVII, and XXV.

⁵⁶Garnett Laidlaw Eskew, The Pageant of the Packets (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929), p. 202.

The Red Ball freight train is the same sort of thing. "A solid mile long" in Bradford's story, these were actually fast freights running on express schedules. They were distinguished by red dots beside them on station masters' charts.

These great and notable phenomena do several things for Bradford's book. They are first of all in it, and since they are great and notable, they are presumably interesting. They also impart some of the flavor of the places or situations they occupy--Billie Bob Russell of southern construction gangs, for example, Stacker Lee of river towns, the "Big Jim White" of the river itself. But more basically, what they do is provide a spectacular environment for a spectacular hero. They augment John Henry by appearing on stage with him (and vice versa), and John Henry is shown altogether preeminent when he bests the likes of Stacker Lee and John Hardy. It is the same device Louis Untermeyer uses when he has his Paul Bunyan face off with Pecos Bill. No one wins in this epic struggle, but Paul's proportions are enhanced by those of his adversary.⁵⁷ If Stacker Lee is "bad," then, John Henry must be "super-bad." And indeed he is according to more recent black parlance in which "bad" equals "good." He is the prototype for the term.

It is quite epical, of course, to unite such a series of people and adventures around a single hero. If it has drawbacks here, it is from a corresponding lack of causal structure. This is to judge the book as a novel, however, and not as an epic. It is in substantial ways

⁵⁷Louis Untermeyer, The Wonderful Adventures of Paul Bunyan (New York: Heritage Press, 1945).

both. The causally-structured Julie Anne plot belongs more to the novel, for instance. An episodic structure and a causal structure exist in the book at the same time, then, with some compatibility. It is unfair to judge the structure on another basis, in any case.

A legitimate criticism might be that certain characters are too obscure for epic purposes--Billie Bob Russell, for example. And there is a railroad engineer in Chapter IX named "old man One-eyed Bill Shelly." The reader is expected to recognize him as another Casey Jones, but this writer has been unable to find any reference to him.

Bradford makes no attempt at literary realism. His settings are minimal. He gives no description of houses or rooms to speak of, nor of streets or towns. Typically he will begin an episode with no more ado than this:

. . . John Henry put on his overalls and his jumper and went out where the white folks had all the niggers working on the streets.⁵⁸

Many of his episodes are improbable, and some are fantastic. These are aspects of the epic and suitable to the book as epic. They are not incompatible with its novelistic aspects.

The book actually contains a good bit of realism if we understand the term in its broader, non-literary, sense. It tells of the building of America, for one thing. The Yellow Dog Railroad John Henry finished "before the sun went down" was an actual part of the Texas & Pacific Railroad, and ran seventy miles from Marshall, Texas to Shreveport, Louisiana. It is the sort of historical backdrop that lends verisimilitude to the story.

⁵⁸Bradford, p. 57.

The Black River country is also real, and Bradford describes it essentially if not in great detail. The river itself is about sixty miles long and empties into the Red River in east-central Louisiana. Much of the adjacent swamp is (or was) thick with moss-covered cypress trees, hence, "de Black River country whar de sun don't never shine." This is where John Henry goes to take care of the pork shortage:

Hogs run wild in the Black River country. Wild and tall. When the Black River people want a side of middlin' or a ham shank or a jowl, they set their dogs in the woods and the dogs run the hogs into a pen. Sometimes the people kill the tall, wild hogs, and sometimes the tall, wild hogs kill the people. If the people kill the hogs they have meat. If the hogs kill the people, they don't need any meat. It is the way they do in the Black River country where the hogs grow high and wild, with razor-sharp backs and tusks like a knitting-needle. They are bad hogs, but they make good meat.⁵⁹

This is true, or was. The Black River swamp provided ideal hog feed, and the system was simply to mark the hogs and turn them loose. At round-up time, dogs were sent in to herd them into pens. Obviously, such hogs tended to be recalcitrant.

A more comprehensive "reality" in the book, though, is its panorama of earlier southern working-class Negro life. It presents the ways there were of making a living. It presents many folkways and superstitions. It presents speech and religion and music. It gives a skeletal but fairly complete view of a culture, in fact, and does this in only two hundred twenty-five short pages.

The only important thing omitted is the racial problem; Bradford seals his actors off from white society for the most part. This is best,

⁵⁹Bradford, p. 15.

too, because to do otherwise would have made a great hero a social inferior. It would have been extraneous to Bradford's story.

Bradford tells us about the black job market by making John Henry a "rambler"--an epic-picaresque device. John Henry becomes in succession a roustabout, a cotton-picker, a railroad dirt-roller, a gambler, a prisoner, a locomotive fireman, a roustabout again, a spike driver, and once again a roustabout. "I may not be no gambler or "rouster" or whatever, he says time after time, "but you show me a man which is and I'll mock him."

It is a fair cross-section of the things an able-bodied, untutored black man could do in those days, at least with any pride. And John Henry dignifies the jobs by doing them especially well. He even lets us in on trade secrets: It seems, for example, that a riverboat roustabout needs to "coonjine" when "rousting" on the gangplank. This, says Bradford, is "a rhythmic little trot that kept a man's thighbones from driving through his hips."⁶⁰

"Let de plank spring," said John Henry, "and I'll spring right back at hit. Let hit buck like a bull, and I'll buck like two bulls! Let hit jump like a high-land frog, and I'll jump like a pant'er in de brake! Let hit weave like a willow tree, and I'll weave like a feather bed! 'Cause I'm John Henry, and I aims to be gittin' around."⁶¹

He tells us the right way to pick cotton:

"Hold yo' fingers a little bent and let yo' hands pass by de bolls. Efn they's nigger blood in yo' fingers de cotton will stick

⁶⁰Bradford, "The Hog Hoisters," Collier's, 85 (5 April 1930), 20, p. 14. It may be interesting that according to the Dictionary of Afro-American Slang, Ed. Clarence Major (New York: International Publishers, 1970), "coonjun" or "coonjin" means "to be exploited."

⁶¹Bradford, John Henry, pp. 10-11

and follow. But you won't be gittin' nowheres."

And he passed his fingers over the bolls and the cotton followed his fingers, but it fell to the ground.

"You got to cup yo' hands to ketch hit, and move twarge de sack, all de same time," he said. "Not fast; jest slow and stiddy." And he showed them how.

"But efn you straighten up and bend over, ev'y time you picks a boll," John Henry told them, "you' back will weary you down. So you got to bend yo' back and keep hit bent." And he showed them that, too, and the cotton fairly jumped from the bolls and rode his hands to the sack.⁶²

And he tells Billie Bob Russell how to get his railroad built:

"You's shadin' de mules in de shade," said John Henry, "and you's drivin' de niggers in de sun."

"Sun don't hurt niggers," said Billie Bob Russell."

"And neither mules," said John Henry. "But you got de mules in de shade, and look at 'em. Dey's skinny like a snake, 'cause dey's offn they feed, and hit ain't hardly none wid they shoulder well."

"That's a fact," said Billie Bob Russell. "But mules cost too much money to put in the sun, when the shade won't do them any good."

"Shade," said John Henry, "is made for white folks and hosses. Sun is made for mules and niggers. But don't drive 'em. Drivin' make a nigger weary, and a weary nigger make a mule fall offn his feed, jes to look at 'em. So efn you wants to git dis Yaller Dog built, Mister Billie Bob Russell," said John Henry, "you give yo' walkin' boss his time and give yo' niggers two big mules and a wheeler. And den you lay back in de shade and watch dis railroad grow!"⁶³

We are given a survey of folkways and superstitions. John Henry and Julie Anne's relationship tells us something, for example, about marriage customs. There were more elaborate and more legal forms available, of course, but common-law arrangements were frequent and were considered as morally binding as any other. John Henry and Julie Anne are married quite properly within their culture, and Julie Anne is expected to let Sam know it.

⁶²Bradford, pp. 25-26.

⁶³Bradford, p. 36.

Dietary habits are gone into at some length. When the pork shortage arrives, we learn how essential that commodity was:

Hog meat was high. Too high for the people to eat. They could get all the turnip greens they needed from the garden. They could lift a head of cabbage at the market, and nobody would mind. And anybody would give them a handful of whippoorwill peas. But who can eat turnip greens without a piece of middlin' meat to cook them down with? What good is a head of cabbage if you haven't got a ham shank to boil along in the pot? And a dog wouldn't eat whippoorwill peas that wasn't simmered with a hog jowl, let alone a man.⁶⁴

There is this passage, and there are a number of others having to do with John Henry's prowess as a trencherman. Except for the incredible amounts sometimes involved, they describe an authentic diet.

Black superstitions are sprinkled throughout the book. They commence with the marvelous circumstances of John Henry's birth--the Mississippi running upstream, the infant's enormous size, and so forth. According to Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, such events at birth are considered portentous by many peoples, American blacks included.⁶⁵

By page two we find that John Henry has the blue gums of a "conjure man."⁶⁶ This is also true of Julie Anne.

"How come you know I'm John Henry?" he asked her.

"You's six foot tall," said Julie Anne, "and you's gittin' around, ain't you?"

"Sho I'm six foot tall," said John Henry, "and I'm gittin' around. But hit's a heap er niggers six foot tall and gittin' "

⁶⁴Bradford, p. 13.

⁶⁵Ed. Maria Leach (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1949), p. 144.

⁶⁶According to Newbell Niles Puckett, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), p. 197, this means witch doctor.

around. I seed a nigger named Sam which is six foot tall and gittin' around."

"Look at me, John Henry," said Julie Anne. "I's six foot tall, too. And I got blue gums and gray eyes."⁶⁷

"I got blue gums and gray eyes, too," said John Henry. "But dat don't make me John Henry, do hit? Let alone, you?"

"And," said Julie Anne, "I comed f'm de Black River country whar de sun don't never shine."

"Me too," said John Henry, "and my name is John Henry, but dat don't make me yo' man."

"Well," said Julie Anne, "I ain't argyin' wid you, John Henry. But don't you forgit, you's my man. 'Cause they's a gris gris on me and you."

"I'm a man," said John Henry, "and I'm six foot tall. But I'm my own."

"You's my man, John Henry," said Julie Anne. And she went in the house and shut the door.⁶⁸

And so they get together. They have to because of the gris gris. This is not the same as Poor Selma's "stinger-ree." A gris gris is a magic charm which originated in West Africa; it is something like fate.⁶⁹ A "stinger-ree" is magic but is more akin to drug addiction.

John Henry's old witch woman is the most prominent example of black superstition. Her main role is to gris gris Poor Selma's "stinger-ree" off:

"So go on wid yo' ju-ju stuff, old woman" [John Henry tells her].⁷⁰ "I'm a man and I holds my haid high. So come on wid yo' conjure!"

The old woman got up and put some thorn sprouts on the fire [she has already used brush, rose leaves, thyme, basil, lilac blooms, black-eyed Susans, mullen leaves, and sassafras roots],

⁶⁷According to Puckett, p. 456, gray eyes are believed able to "see visions."

⁶⁸Bradford, pp. 48-49.

⁶⁹Funk and Wagnalls, p. 466.

⁷⁰According to Puckett, p. 561, "ju-ju" is the same thing as gris gris.

and then she poured seven buckets of river water on it. Then she shut her eyes and rocked back and forth in the chimney corner while she said:

"Burn fire and squinch dis water.
Crackle thawns, and crack Poor Selma.
Rise, free, smoke, and rise, John Henry."⁷¹

This use of roots and such is common conjure practice, Puckett says: ". . . a complete list of those used by the profession as a whole would form a pharmacopoeia in itself."⁷²

Magic and superstition do lard the book, then, and John Henry's end is no less portentous than his beginning:

Then the lightning cleaved the air and the sky turned black like night. The Mississippi River ran uphill and the earth shook like a feather. The sun blazed out like a ball of fire, and started to set across the river. . . . The thunder clapped and the screech owl screeched. . . .⁷³

And John Henry died.

Before this, though, there is a reasonably authentic glimpse of old-time black religion. John Henry's problems have overcome him, and he has gone to Hell-buster's Old Ship of Zion Church for relief.⁷⁴ He is told to bow his head and moan, and that if God hits him "wid de light, He'll sho burn up yo' burden."

⁷¹Bradford, pp. 97-98.

⁷²Puckett, p. 245.

⁷³Bradford, pp. 215-216.

⁷⁴This name is not unprecedented. One of Bradford's models was a black preacher named Sin-Splitting Samuel, "a North Louisiana itinerant," wrote Bradford, "who rides an old sorrel mule named Balaam. 'I reckon,' the Splitter told me, 'you c'd call me a Free-Will Baptist on account er I got to mingle in so many communities.'" (Bradford, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Collier's, 96 (21 September 1935), 17.)

⁷⁵Bradford, John Henry, p. 206.

So John Henry groveled and moaned until he choked down. Then he stood up and sang:

"Hyar poor me, on my bended knees,
And I don't know what to say.
But I'm axin' you, won't you please, dear Lawd,
Won't you bear my burden away, Lawd, Lawd,
Won't you bear my burden away."

When John Henry sang that song, God hit him with the spirit and knocked him dead. He moaned and groaned and frothed at the mouth, but he couldn't raise his hand. Hell-buster preached him into the Kingdom, and the women gathered around him and sang Zion songs, and for forty days and forty nights John Henry was struck dead on the floor.⁷⁵

It is obviously exaggerated, but the scene is mainly authentic.

No less an authority than W. E. B. Du Bois says,

. . . the Frenzy . . . , when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest. It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor--the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance. All this is nothing new in the world, but old as religion, as Delphi and Endor. And so firm a hold did it have on the Negro, that many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible.⁷⁶

There are nearly a hundred songs or parts of songs in John Henry, and this is too many. It distracts too often from the dialogue or narrative, and without music, the songs are not as appealing as songs might be.

They are otherwise a worthwhile touch. To say that they help flesh out the story is understatement; they comprise about ten percent

⁷⁵Bradford, John Henry, p. 206.

⁷⁶W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1926), p. 191.

of it in sheer words. Too, since songs are the heart of the John Henry legend, it is fitting that they have a prominent place in any book about it.

Bradford took more of his ideas from songs than might be thought. There are black folk songs about the contest, of course, and about Stacker Lee and John Hardy:

Stagolee killed a man an' laid him on de flo',
What's dat he kill him wid? Dat same ole fohty-fo'.⁷⁷

But there are also songs about "red ball" freight trains, "Jay Gooze" (Gould), construction foremen armed with .44's such as Billie Bob Russell carries, and there is one song about a dissatisfied man catching a freight as John Henry does when he goes to Memphis:

When a woman takes the blues,
She tucks her head and cries;
But when a man catches the blues,
He catches er freight and rides.⁷⁸

There are songs about travelling in general, infidelity, women driving steel, betting (as Julie Anne does against the steam winch), and John Henry's funeral. There are songs about eating, various jobs, hogs, mules, prison, sex, liquor, cocaine, death, birth, and religion. In fact, the categories one finds in Negro song anthologies closely parallel the incidents in John Henry. It is almost a case of music being set to words. If Bradford has chosen to include songs, then, it is not only an authentic touch, but the acknowledgement of a favor.

⁷⁷Odum and Johnson, The Negro and His Songs (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1925), p. 197.

⁷⁸Newman I. White, American Negro Folk-Songs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 394.

Another justification for the songs is the essential role music has played in black culture. "It is only in his music," says James Baldwin, "which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story."⁷⁹

Guy Johnson says that whenever black males do heavy work requiring regular muscular movements, the chances are that they sing. Their songs may deal with the work itself or with anything else that comes to mind, especially wanderers and women.⁸⁰ Most of Bradford's songs deal with work, wanderers, and women, and in the chapter where John Henry is "saved," there are several religious songs. The place of "spirituals" in black culture has been obviously fundamental.

Negro songs tell us a good deal about Negro culture, as well as being an important part of that culture. Bradford is wise to take advantage of this, both by including songs and by taking ideas from them.

A question remains concerning the authenticity of songs he does include. Bradford has stated, in fact, that he made most of them up.⁸¹ Did he? And more important, if he did, did he create representative fakes? If his songs are indistinguishable from "the real thing," they can still serve their purpose by reflecting black culture. They mislead otherwise, and do the culture and the book a disservice.

⁷⁹James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 24, as reprinted in Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, Images of the Negro in American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 233.

⁸⁰Johnson, p. 69.

⁸¹Bradford, in Richardson, p. 180.

Probably most of them are reasonable fakes. Bradford may have made these up, technically speaking, but they are in fact minor variations on authentic songs easily found in anthologies.⁸² Here are examples:

In Newman White's anthology, American Negro Folk-Songs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 279:

If you don't believe I'm sinking down,
Look what a hole I'm in.

In Bradford's John Henry, p. 57:

"Ef-er you don't think I'm sinkin'--wham!
Lawd, looky what a hole I'm in--wham!"

In American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 279:

Thought I heard--huh!
Judge Pequette say--huh!
Forty-five dol-lars--huh!
Take him away--huh!

In Bradford's John Henry, p. 59:

"You lay yo' sorrows to a woman's name,
And yo' burdens to a woman's ways,
But I'm gonter tell you how come I'm hyar,
'Cause de judge said, Sixty days, Lawd, Lawd,
Judge Leonard said, Sixty days."

In American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 264:

Water-boy, water-boy,
Bring de water roun',
If yo' don't like yo' job,
Set de bucket down.

In Bradford's John Henry, p. 30:

"Water-roo, water-roo, bring yo' water round.
Efn you ain't got no water, set yo' bucket down!"

⁸²I have used the anthologies listed in the attached bibliography plus the monographs by Johnson and Chappell.

In American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 328:

Now look here woman, I can't stand
You runnin' aroun' wid another man.

In Bradford's John Henry, pp. 172, 189, and 200:

"I love you, woman, but I don't like yo' low-down ways."

In American Negro Folk-Songs, p. 315:

It takes a dark-skinned baby
To make a preacher throw his Bible down.

It take a long, lean, lanky gal
To make a rabbit fight a hound.

In Bradford's John Henry, p. 75:

"High-yaller woman make a preacher lay his Bible down.
Brown-skin lady make a deacon turn round and round.
But dat low-down Selma make a mule kick his stable
down."

There are many more such examples, varying only in detail from anthologized models. They are obviously authentic enough for Bradford's purposes. A few songs he may have written completely by himself. I have been unable to find anthologized counterparts for every song in the book. And some are truly authentic, as some of the hammer songs in Chapter XVII, for example:

"Ain't no hammer--wham!
In dis delta--wham!
Ring like mine--wham!
Lawdy, ring like mine--wham!
'Cause dis old hammer--wham!
Shine like silver--wham!
And she ring like gold--wham!
Lawdy, ring like gold--wham!"

"Dis old hammer--wham!
Killed John Henry--wham!
But hit can't kill me--wham!
Lawd, hit can't kill me--wham!"

These are in all of the anthologies. Bradford's tendency, though, is to use songs varying only slightly from authentic versions. These are not unrepresentative or unrealistic, and are quite justified if in smaller numbers.

Bradford's black dialect is not entirely authentic. It is in fact "of a sort that never was on land or sea," according to Guy Johnson.⁸³

And this is fortunate. Dialect is unreadable in direct proportion to its authenticity, it seems. The following examples show this:

In Bradford's John Henry, p. 6:

"Dar, now!" said the old woman. "Got a steamboatin' song already, son, and you ain't started to gittin' around yit! Listen at me, John Henry. N'Awlins is too far to wawk to, and you ain't got no wings. But de steamboats has tuck many a good nigger down de river, and dey ain't never brang one back. So jest mind out!"

In Joel Chandler Harris, The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1955), p. 21:

"Tooby sho, honey. You see yo' pa pull his shut off? Well, dat des zackly de way dey duz. But dish yere nigger w'at I'm tellin' you 'bout, he kyò'd his brer de ve'y fus' pass he made at him."

In William Styron, The Confession of Nat Turner (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 262:

"Yam, . . . Majah Ribbles he lib dar, ap yonnah road ap yonnah.
. . . Yam, me tek 'ee dar, missy, me tek 'ee dar."

Admittedly these are different dialects. I submit that this is not why Harris and Styron are harder to read, though. They are harder

⁸³Johnson, "A Mighty Legend," The Nation, 133 (7 October 1931), p. 367.

because they are more authentic phonetically. Bradford would probably have written the fragments by Harris and Styron this way:

"To be sho', honey. You see yo' paw pull his shirt off? Well, dat's jus' zackly de way dey does. But dis here nigger what I'm tellin' you 'bout, he cyored his brother de ve'y first pass he made at him."

"Ma'm, . . . Majah Ribley [actually Ridley] he live dere, up yonder road up yonder. . . . Ma'm, me take 'ee dere, missy, me take 'ee dere."

To be more authentic phonetically, the John Henry piece would have to sound like this:

"Dah, niah!" said the old woman. "Got a steamboatin' sawng awready, son, an' you ain't stahted t' gittin' 'roun' yit. Listen it me, John Henry. N'Awlins is too fah t' wawk to, an' you ain't got no wings. But de steamboats is tuck many a good nigga down de rivah, an' dey ain't nevah brang one back. So jes' min' out."

I submit that Bradford's version (and the "doctored" versions of Harris and Styron) are better. The phonetically more correct versions may be more useful to linguists and anthropologists, but the Bradford type certainly makes for easier reading. And it manages this without sacrificing the essential flavor or structure of the speech. It is something "never on land or sea," true; it is compromised. It becomes a better medium of literary communication by this, however, and without giving up anything basic.

Let us see exactly what Bradford does: His sentence structure seems authentic; black syntax does not differ that much from accepted usage:

But steamboats have taken many good Negroes down the river, and they have never brought one back.

--simply becomes:

But de steamboats has tuck many a good nigger down de river, and dey ain't never brang one back.

This is the same structure.

The vocabulary seems authentic too. Words such as "dar," "ain't" "de," "dey," "brang," and "jest" are familiar enough to anyone who has listened to untutored southern blacks, especially to older ones who were around in Bradford's day.

There are authentic black idioms such as "gittin' around" (for peregrinating) and "mind out" (for be careful). There are superfluous words like "started to gittin' around" and "too far to wawk to." This is typical of many American dialects including southern Negro. Such "errors" as "listen at me" and "you ain't got no wings" are also typical, along with the beginning of sentences with connectives such as "But" and "So."

These elements are authentic. Where Bradford compromises, as I have suggested, is with phonetics. He does this by spelling many words legitimately instead of trying to reproduce their Negro sounds. Compare the two John Henry "versions": In the Bradford "version," "now" is used instead of the phonetically truer (but unreadable) "niah."⁸⁴ Also "already" is used for "awready," "around" for "'roun'," "at" for "it," "mind" for "min'," and so on.

The result is obviously easier to read. But there is also enough left of the "real thing" so that there is no mistake about what we are reading. The authentic elements which are there suggest others

⁸⁴This sound is very difficult to reproduce without phonetic symbolism. Suffice it to say that there is no "w" sound in the "now" of the dialect at issue.

which are not, so that any reader familiar with black dialect will automatically read "po'" if it happens to be spelled "poor." An illusion of the dialect is maintained, then, without some of the orthographical clumsiness of the dialect itself.

It is impossible to transcribe any speech perfectly, of course, with a standard alphabet. Without phonetic symbolism, some compromise is unavoidable. I maintain that Bradford compromises to a happy extent.

John Henry's narration is a compromise also. It is basically the same dialect as the speech, and it "matches" the speech, as I suggested happens in This Side of Jordan. Like the speech, it is "polished up" for literary purposes. The difference is that it is polished more highly, as I also suggested with Jordan. Bradford knew just how far he could refine his narration without destroying its black flavor. His formula is simple enough. He takes the dialect, spells all of the words right, and leaves the rest. (His formula for speech is to spell some of the words right.) The result is language close enough to "literary" English to seem such, and close enough to black dialect to give a hint of this too. It is "literary Negro," really, and what could be more appropriate for the narration of a Negro book? It is a device which takes us part-way into the black world and holds us there until the dialogue can come along and take us further.

CHAPTER IV

John Henry is a curious book. It is boldly fantastic on one hand, what with forty-four pound infants, rivers running upstream, and so much more. On the other hand, it says much about a real culture-- about its economics, institutions, superstitions, diet, art, speech, and so on. For so short a book this is no mean feat.

Reviewers said a number of favorable things. Constance Rourke said this:

Mr. Bradford far transcends legend. It is a gauge of his power as a story-teller and a poet (he is unobtrusively both) that he gives a new compulsion to its simple sequences. He has penetrated beneath its established outlines but without sophistication. He has widened its channels without violence.⁸⁵

"John Henry" [sic] just misses being a brilliant piece of work. At times it almost gets down to something vital, something elemental in Negro life. There is a little too much of the tall-tale and Big-talk sort of thing--and yet it may be that it will live for just that reason.⁸⁶

There is no question regarding Mr. Bradford's literary skill [said the Springfield Republican .] His dialect is vibrant and supple, and his phrases have a rhythm that is graciously insinuating; though doubtless suggested by spontaneous Negro narration.⁸⁷

⁸⁵Constance Rourke, The Forum, 86 (December 1931), xix, as reprinted in Book Review Digest, Eds. Marion A. Knight, Mertice M. James, and Dorothy Brown (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1932), p. 118.

⁸⁶Johnson, "A Mighty Legend," p. 367.

⁸⁷Springfield Republican, 13 September 1931, p. 73, as reprinted in Book Review Digest, p. 119.

A trouble-spot occurs in the matter of character stereotypes. Hamilton Basso, another reviewer, complained that John Henry (the character) never quite "comes alive."⁸⁸ And the Springfield Republican questioned whether any of the characters or their conceits are completely authentic.⁸⁹

These are not idle reservations. Basso is apparently bothered by the book's skimpy stage settings (one setting is indeed as indistinct as the next), but he does refer explicitly to the hero. Sterling Brown, in an article about black literary characters, calls John Henry simply a clown.⁹⁰

What is the case? John Henry can be awfully funny, but is he just a clown? I think not, because if he is anything at all, he is many things. He is a fighter, lover, teacher, victim, worker, warlock, braggart, and prodigious eater, besides being occasionally funny. What of other characters, though? Are any of these simple stereotypes?

Obviously most are. The old witch woman, the sporting man, the woman of easy virtue, the old woman advisor,⁹¹ the hell-busting preacher --all of these had long been a part of the black literary gallery. Julie Anne's friend Sam is something of a naturalistic nemesis. Blind Lemon harks all the way back to Tiresias. Stacker Lee is a standard

⁸⁸Hamilton Basso, The New Republic, 68 (30 September 1931), 186, as reprinted in Book Review Digest, pp. 118-119.

⁸⁹Springfield Republican, p. 119.

⁹⁰Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, 2 (1933), 190.

⁹¹The old witch woman, and also Aunt Dinah, Hell-buster's protegee.

for black badmen. And the other workers on John Henry's jobs are familiar black buffoons:

Another rouster grabbed a hog by the hind leg and tried to drag him on the boat. But the big Black River hog kicked just one time, and he kicked that rousterbout from the hog-pen clear to the main deck!

"Dat ain't no hog," said the rouster. "Dat's a mule. Or else he got mule blood in his heart."⁹²

Julie Anne is the "faithless wife," of course. And she is virtually as one-dimensional as the supporting characters. The only thing rounding her is her ambivalent attitude. She does love John Henry and regrets her misdeeds--as she proves in the end by killing herself.

The character of John Henry is much harder to bring to terms. Is he, first of all, any sort of black literary stereotype? There are seven kinds of these, according to Sterling Brown:

1. The Contented Slave.
2. The Wretched Freeman.
3. The Comic Negro.
4. The Brute Negro.
5. The Tragic Mulatto.
6. The Local Color Negro.
7. The Exotic Primitive.⁹³

John Henry obviously belongs to neither One, Two, nor Five. The fourth category has to do with animalistic inferiority and does not fit him either. The seventh category stresses savage African origins and does not fit. Comic and Local Color apply to some extent, but fall far short of blanketing the whole character. They are merely facets of him.

⁹²Bradford, John Henry, p. 17.

⁹³Brown, p. 180.

John Henry has certain traits, but is not completely a black stereotype, at least within Brown's scheme. Can any literary category hold him?

Richard Dorson thinks so. He says, first, that John Henry has many of the features of American folk heroes in general. All exalt physical virtues, he says, and perform or boast of feats of strength and daring. And all of them display humor. "American idols," he says, "all rise from the ranks of the common man and exhibit the traits and manners of unwashed democracy, spitting, bragging, brawling, talking slangily, ridiculing the dandy, and naively trumpeting their own merits."⁹⁴

So John Henry shares traits with heroes such as Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, and Mike Fink--all white men. This might seem contrived on Bradford's part, and to some extent it is, but there is actually ample justification for it in the lore. There is humor, physical prowess, bragging, daring, and slang in the authentic songs in this essay, for example. And while this sort of thing may not be a peculiarly black phenomenon, it should not detract from the book as folklore in general. No book can be peculiarly black in all ways.

Dorson's particular tag for John Henry is "frontier boaster." This is a well-established American folk stereotype, he says, after the likes of Davy Crockett and Pecos Bill:⁹⁵

⁹⁴Dorson, American Folklore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 201.

⁹⁵Dorson, "The Career of 'John Henry,'" p. 157.

"I'm from north of North Dakota and south of the South Pole!" cried [Pecos] Bill! "I'm from a part of the country where boys comb their hair with porcupines and the men brush their beards with spruce trees. As to where I'm going, I haven't made up my mind yet. Perhaps I'll travel on. Perhaps I'll stay."⁹⁶

Compare this:

"I done worked and I done played, and now I aims to travel. So farewell, all you Franklin Street bullies. Fare you well, you ladies. 'Cause I'm big and bad and had ought to be chained, and I comes f'm I don't know whar. I'm six foot tall, and I weighs a ton, and my name is writ in my hat!"⁹⁷

So Dorson does make a point. As he says, John Henry "reiterates his tall-tale outcries on nearly every page."⁹⁸ The character has a dimension, however, which Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill lack.

John Henry is essentially a tragic figure. He is prodigious, but he is vulnerable to the misdeeds of a girl. The ultimate purpose of all of his vainglory is to sharpen this irony. He is a "frontier boaster," all right, but only as a dramatic means, not as an end. In the case of the other heroes it is an end. They are heroic, they tell people so, and that is simply that.

John Henry is not a literary stereotype, then. He is not just a clown or a local color phenomenon, but many things. He is a "frontier boaster" only in a secondary sense. And he differs from typical American folk heroes by being too human: typical American folk heroes are not brought down by jealousy.

No literary label can hold John Henry because he is a composite of many literary elements. He even shares the various stereotypical

⁹⁶Untermeyer, p. 75.

⁹⁷Bradford, p. 64.

⁹⁸Dorson, p. 157.

traits of the other characters. He is faithless, for example, when he visits Poor Selma, and he is a fighter, warlock, and gambler. He does all types of work. "Show me a _____," he says time after time, "and I'll mock him."

John Henry does have stereotypical qualities, but he has the qualities of many stereotypes. He is a composite of literary and traditional elements with a bit of humanity in addition. He is artificial, but he is certainly not simple. Neither is he dull and flat.

The secondary characters are indeed stereotypes, and Julie Anne just misses being one. This is unfortunate because it is unrealistic. Characters cannot be convincing with single traits. Perhaps it is forgiveable in the case of the secondary characters; John Henry is a short book with many of these, and there is simply not room to develop them more fully. If they are to be in the book at all, and the book is to be less than a thousand pages, then they must be simplified. Stereotyping does save space, and is an aid to emphasis and balance. With Julie Anne there can be no such excuse. Considering her importance and time spent on stage, her characterization is poor.

Most of these characters may never have existed in the flesh. They are authentic literary types, however, and their traits have certainly existed in black society. Many persons know this firsthand. John Henry is a different matter. He is neither a type nor a plausible human being nor authentic. He is an idealization, just as such a hero should be. If he fails to "come alive," it is because we judge him mistakenly in human terms.

CHAPTER V

When Bradford's book appeared in 1931, a milieu of black protest literature existed, with such contributors as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen. "The most significant literature dealing with the Negro [in the 1930's] is . . . that setting forth the Negro in the stress of economic and social conditions, reflecting 'sullen, straight, bitter realism,'" wrote Halsford Luccock.⁹⁹ This seemed to express the attitude of many at the time.

There are overtones of social protest in the John Henry legend. In the legend a black hero successfully contests with the white man's steam drill, using only a hammer and his own great strength. That he dies can be taken as a tacit indictment of the steam drill, i.e., white society.

Bradford's John Henry sidesteps this. The story is set apart from the white world and touches only an occasional (and benign) white foreman or steamboat captain. There is no interaction between the races except where absolutely necessary. (White men were the foremen and captains, after all.)

⁹⁹Halsford E. Luccock, American Mirror: Social, Ethical and Religious Aspects of American Literature, 1930-1940. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940), p. 79, as reprinted in Gross and Hardy, p. 18.

This is justifiable. Bradford's story, rightly or wrongly, is the tragedy of a folk hero and his woman. It is a tragedy brought on by its protagonists, and it is the story of a mighty man who "ain't nothin' but a man" for all that. Any infusion of racial injustice would not only be extraneous to this, but would be a whole new book. It might be a more significant book, but it would be different fundamentally. In it, white society would take the place of Julie Anne, and John Henry would become a Reconstruction Nat Turner.

Bradford obviously had other plans. Perhaps this explains why he underplayed the contest with the steam winch.

The book has three real flaws. Two of these have already been mentioned--the flat characterization of Julie Anne and the rather incidental death scene. Bradford should have used a tunneling version for reasons already given. And the protest aspect need not have obtruded if kept reasonably symbolic.

There is also the Freudian element Chappell speaks of. Chappell thinks the tunnel, the steel rod, the hammer, and the drill are sexual symbols. And he makes a rather good case for this by citing certain song stanzas. According to Chappell, it is a woman who "really" kills John Henry.

If true, this lends fine support to Bradford's use of Julie Anne. It is all the more dramatic reason, though, for scrapping the steam winch.

Other criticism of the book has to do with its plot structure. Much of this structure is plainly episodic, in the epic manner. This

should not disturb by itself, because John Henry is in many ways an epic.¹⁰⁰ What are disturbing are the irregularities caused by the second plot--the causally-connected, Julie Anne, "love" plot. This device ties the book together causally in some spots, but in others simply backs away to let events run as they will. Episodes A, B, and C may be causally linked, but then D and E come along and simply happen. (The death contest is a glaring example of this.) It is altogether inconsistent and disconcerting. Bradford should have used either a plot-subplot structure or one structure entirely. That he used both on the same level mars his book.

¹⁰⁰In this way, for instance, in its use of the supernatural, and in its broad presentation of a race and culture.

CHAPTER VI

In 1939 a dramatization of John Henry appeared on Broadway. It was billed as a play with music and was authored by Bradford, with Jacques Wolfe furnishing the musical score. It followed the book closely, featured Paul Robeson as John Henry and Josh White as Blind Lemon, and closed after a short run.

It was not a good play. Time called it "an elaborate bore" without "dramatic excitement or heroic force."

John Henry performed his feats as though they were vaudeville acts. The music rose and fell, ebbed and flowed, without seeming to come from the hearts of the black people who sang it.¹⁰¹

Rosamond Gilder said in Theatre Arts that the script was "unwritten." Robeson was given no dialogue to work with, she said, and,

the high spirits, rich language and roaring humors which should surely have been in evidence were lacking. John Henry is an emanation of human desires and appetites, he is an earthy, warm-blooded, lusty creature of field and cane brake. There was not enough laughter and violence in the script.¹⁰²

The play was too stylized and not dramatic enough. Like the book, it contained too many songs,¹⁰³ and it lost dramatic force by using the steam winch version of the contest. Bradford was probably

¹⁰¹Anon., Review of Bradford's play, John Henry: A Play, Time (22 January 1940), p. 50.

¹⁰²Rosamond Gilder, Review of Bradford's play, Theatre Arts, 24 (March 1940), 167.

¹⁰³The songs are nevertheless excellent. They are recorded on Electra, EKL-123, singing by Josh White.

inspired to do the play by the success of The Green Pastures and Heyward-Gershwin's Porgy and Bess (1935). It is unfortunate that he did not get Marc Connelly to help him.

The important thing about the play, though, is that it was staged, reviewed, and otherwise written about. Because of this, it complemented the book it was based on in popularizing the name of John Henry. Johnson and Chappell had helped, of course. And the parallels which existed between John Henry and the already established Paul Bunyan helped.¹⁰⁴ In 1930, actually, Frank Shay had made the first presentation of John Henry as a folk hero. It was a chapter in his book of American folk heroes and was called "John Henry, the Steel Driving Man."¹⁰⁵ It was based on a 1927 essay of Johnson's.¹⁰⁶

Johnson, his collaborator Howard Odum, and Shay wrote about John Henry before Bradford did. But Johnson and Odum were scholars and were not widely read outside of the academic community. Shay contributed one chapter in an obscure collection. It was Bradford with his two works

¹⁰⁴In 1926 Johnson and Howard Odum had called John Henry "the black Paul Bunyan of the Negro workingman" (Negro Workaday Songs, p. 221). Dorson says, "Bradford's John Henry resembles James Stevens' Paul Bunyan of 1925 as a fictional portrayal of an American 'folk' hero based on a slender thread of oral tradition--in one case a few northwoods anecdotes, in the other a single ballad." Dorson cites newspaper articles about the Bradford-Wolfe play which referred to John Henry as the "Paul Bunyan of the Negroes" and "the Paul Bunyan of his race" (Dorson, p. 158).

¹⁰⁵Frank Shay, Here's Audacity! American Legendary Heroes (New York: 1930), pp. 245-253.

¹⁰⁶Johnson, "John Henry: A Negro Legend," Ebony and Topaz, A Col-lectanea, Ed. Charles S. Johnson (New York: Opportunity Publishing Co., 1927), pp. 47-51.

and their attendant publicity who really established John Henry in the national consciousness. He opened up the market for other writers, and the process snowballed. Writers of juvenile books began including the drilling story in their collections of American folk heroes. Some of these writers were Carl Carmer (1937, 1942), Olive Beaupré Miller (1939), Anne Malcolmson (1941), Walter Blair (1944), and Maria Leach (1955).¹⁰⁷

Three others wrote complete books about John Henry, also aimed at the juvenile market:

James C. Bowman's John Henry: The Rambling Black Ulysses (1942) has nearly three hundred pages and, like Bradford's book, follows John Henry through an entire improvised career--from plantation slave boy through the Civil War and into freedom. Its tenuously unifying theme is John Henry's search for Polly Ann, his black Penelope. This shows Bradford's influence. So does the picaresque structure, the use of songs, and a Stacker Lee-type character named "Bo Shoat."

Bowman's narration lacks the black flavor of Bradford's:

After a week or two young Master Jimmie grew tired of simply riding about the plantation. He decided it was time to teach Morning Star to jump.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷Carmer, "How John Henry Beat the Steam Drill Down," The Hurricane's Children (New York and Toronto, 1937), pp. 122-128; Miller, "John Henry's Contest with the Big Steam Drill," Heroes, Outlaws and Funny Fellows (New York: 1939), pp. 147-157; Malcolmson, "John Henry," Yankee Doodle's Cousins (Boston: 1941), pp. 101-107; Carmer, "John Henry," America Sings (New York: 1942), pp. 174-179; Blair, "John Henry and the Machine in West Virginia," Tall Tale America (New York: 1944), pp. 203-219; Leach, "John Henry," The Rainbow Book of American Folk Tales and Legends (Cleveland and New York: 1958), pp. 33-35.

¹⁰⁸James Cloyd Bowman, John Henry: The Rambling Black Ulysses (Chicago: Albert Whitman & Co., 1942), p. 59.

The songs are patently inauthentic:

"An' eve'ywhere John Henry go, he work a miracle,
He teach Gawd's colored chillun dat work is play,
Lawd, Lawd, he learn Gawd's colored folks a happy workin' song,
An' eve'y day he holler loud an' long for his Polly Ann."¹⁰⁹

And the dialect is unconvincing and patronizing:

"But even den you don' grab up what's on yo' plate and stuff yo' mouf 'till it give de terrible appearance as ef it gwine bus' wide open. You takes a average size bite. An' after dat, you lets yo' toofs have de joy an' pleasure of playin' hide and seek wid de food for a good long time. Say, as long as till you can say Jack Rob'son forwards an' also back-a-ways three or four times. An' all dis while you is tastin' an' smellin' de delectable flavor. You takes plenty of time to smack yo' lips an' smile from ear to ear 'fore you takes de nex' bite. Dis is to show yo' mama how good she have cook it for you."

"Dis am a 'lightenin' 'splanification!" Daddy Willie exclaimed.

"It is dat," added Aunt Liza smiling. "It's one, John Henry, dat you can't afford to miss in de slightes' detail."¹¹⁰

"Terrible appearance," "delectable," "'lightenin' 'splanification," and "de slightes' detail" are words these characters would never have used in the first place, let alone butcher. The book ends by exhorting blacks to stay in their places and be content.

Irwin Shapiro's John Henry and the Double Jointed Steam-Drill (1945) is a short book focusing on the Big Bend Tunnel episode. John Hardy and "Pollie Ann" appear in it, and, as a concession to the children, John Henry is allowed to live. There are some authentic songs and some obviously contrived ones. And there are some flagrant robberies:

And John Henry said, "I'm from the Black River Country where
the sun don't ever shine. I've picked cotton till I could pick

¹⁰⁹Bowman, p. 213.

¹¹⁰Bowman, pp. 44-45.

cotton in my sleep. I got an itch in my heel, so I travelled down to New Orleans to get me a job of work.¹¹¹

That was Shapiro's. The following is Bradford's:

"I comes f'm de Black River country whar de sun don't never shine," said John Henry.¹¹²

"I got a eetch on my heel. . . ."113

[John Henry has come to New Orleans after picking cotton in Chapter V.]

"I'm huntin' a job er work, Cap'm," John Henry told him.¹¹⁴

Those who wish to read the book can find other examples of Shapiro's indebtedness.

H. W. Felton's John Henry and His Hammer (1950) is also short and also focuses on the tunneling episode. There is no girl this time, and the songs are somewhat fewer in number. They are obviously ersatz. The narrative style, like Bowman's is "correct":

The bright southern sun gave its strength and its light and its warmth to him as he went down the dusty road, and his feet pressed again and again against the fertile black earth of the valley.¹¹⁵

The dialect is contrived and unconvincing:

"This night is as black as inside a coal mine," mused Daddy Mention as he looked in awe upon the scene. "An' the moon is as red as a hero's blood; an' the stars is as white as a angel's wing' an' the wind and the river has got a strange an' unreal power."¹¹⁶

¹¹¹Irwin Shapiro, John Henry and the Double Jointed Steam-Drill (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1945), p. 5.

¹¹²Bradford, p. 63.

¹¹³Bradford, p. 5.

¹¹⁴Bradford, p. 59.

¹¹⁵Harold W. Felton, John Henry and His Hammer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), p. 13.

¹¹⁶Felton, p. 4.

The word "hero" would probably be unknown to Daddy Mention. "Unreal" would certainly be. "As" and "is" are used in several places where they should be deleted or shortened (cf. "the moon's red as a hero's blood"). And there are too few phonetic "errors"--"this" and "the" should be changed to "dis" and "de" or "dis" and "th," at least.

Felton's hero is unimposing. Instead of Bradford's mighty brag-gart, we have a kindly, almost philosophical John Henry. This is probably appropriate in a children's book. In Bowman's version, however, John Henry very nearly becomes an Uncle Tom. This is racial arrogance of a rather extreme sort.

But whatever their shortcomings, these books did help popularize the John Henry legend--a legend John and Alan Lomax have called "probably America's greatest single piece of folklore."¹¹⁷ This is their significance. That Bradford suggested them should be obvious. They borrowed his characters, his use of songs, his episodes, his picaresque structure, and, in the case of Shapiro, his words. They could not have been written without him, nor likely begun.

In 1962, according to Dorson, "John Henry" was the most widely recorded folk song sold publicly.¹¹⁸ In that year, the Phonolog Record Index listed fifty current versions of the ballad and fifteen of the work song "Nine Pound Hammer." The Library of Congress Copyright Catalog lists over a hundred John Henry titles since 1916. Only ten of

¹¹⁷John Lomax and Alan Lomax, eds., Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 258.

¹¹⁸Dorson, p. 161.

these were registered before 1937. John Henry: A Play was produced in 1939. Its songs were its redeeming feature, and Josh White has recorded these many times since. Like Bradford's book, they inspired imitators.

So Bradford has taken some tales and songs about a black laborer, introduced various elements from various sources, and put together a book (and a play) out of them. It is an interesting book, so considered, and a good one. But its importance goes beyond these considerations. It records many aspects of a dying culture, for one thing. And more specifically, it has been singular in popularizing one of the greatest expressions of that culture. Because of Bradford, John Henry is no longer the exclusive property of the "folk." He has belonged to the people for some time now.

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