

OBITUARY

Richard M. Dorson

March 12, 1916—September 11, 1981

On June 28, 1981, while on the tennis courts, Richard M. Dorson suffered a heart attack which led to his death on September 11. The fact that he was playing tennis at the age of 65 after earlier enduring health problems that would have crippled other men is symptomatic of the vigor, spirit, and tenacity that marked his whole life and career.

Born in New York City in 1916, Dorson attended Phillips Exeter Academy and then studied history at Harvard University where he received the AB in 1937, the MA in 1940, and the Ph. D. in 1943. While at Harvard he was exposed to and excited by the burgeoning field of American Studies. His residence coincided with the founding of the Harvard History of American Civilization Program by Professors F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, Howard Mumford Jones, Bernard DeVoto, and Ralph Barton Perry, an extraordinarily gifted group of scholars knit by close friendships and collaborative efforts.

Dorson joined the collaboration and soon became one of the publishing scholars of the new movement with his first two major works, *Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend*, a volume which he edited while working towards the MA in 1939, and *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow: New England Popular Tales and Legends*, an outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1946. The stories in the latter collection had been culled mostly from printed sources, but their connections with folktales alerted him to the fact that folklore was an academic discipline, though not taught as such at Harvard in his time. His first real contact with folklorists came when he attended the summer Folklore Institute held at Indiana University in 1946. Filled with enthusiasm for the notion that tales such as he had found in written sources could be collected from living informants, he undertook field trips to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The host of remarkable informants he encountered there produced in him an amazed delight clearly seen in his *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (1952). Indeed, this fascination with the richness, vitality, and variety of the

oral tradition never left him. Its imprint is to be seen in many of his works such as *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States* (1964) of his middle years and *Land of the Millrats* (1981), published posthumously. The outgrowth of fieldwork done in the Gary and Calumet region in 1975, the latter volume shows that this fascination with the oral tradition lasted until the end of his life.

Indeed, his insistence that the oral tradition is the hallmark of folklore led him into a major controversy, one of several in which he was immersed in his long career, thanks to the passion with which he held his convictions. He coined the word "fakelore" to apply to materials that did not meet his rigorous standards and he did not hesitate to use the term in biting essays and reviews. He carried on these controversies in the same way he played tennis. He played hard and he fought to win, and he played fair. He soon found his opponent's weak point, be it a weak backhand or a weak theoretical point, and hammered away at that, usually with signal success.

Dorson's early interest in and training in history constantly asserted itself in his work in folklore. He was convinced that American folklore could best be understood in the context of American history. This theme underlies many of his writings and is most explicit in his two works, "A Theory for American Folklore" published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1959 and *American Folklore and the Historian* (1971). His concern with history was manifested in another way, too, in his long series of essays and books dealing with the history of the study of folklore. This series culminated in the set of books published in 1968, *The British Folklorists: A History* and *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths: Selections from the British Folklorists*.

Other facets of his interest, all resulting in publications, were Afro-American folklore, African folklore, and Japanese folklore. His primary concern was always with folktales and legends. He solicited the contributions for and edited the "Folktales of the World Series" to which he added his own volume, *Folktales Told Around the World* (1975).

Dorson's interests in Japanese folklore were galvanized by a year he spent as Fulbright Professor of American Studies at the University of Tokyo in 1956-57. There he met many Japanese folklorists, some of whom were later able to come to Indiana University as visiting scholars. He was especially attracted to the legends he read and heard and published *Folk Legends of Japan* in 1962. Throughout the remainder of his life he labored to promote the study of Asian folklore and especially to strengthen contacts between the folklorists of Asia and the United States.

Dorson's many publications (he wrote or edited nearly forty books together with a host of articles, essays, and reviews) brought national and international repute. Works of his have been translated into Italian, Spanish, German, and Japanese. No one could seriously question the assertion that, for many years, he was America's best known folklorist. He received many honors and awards. His books won the Chicago Folklore Prize three times and he was a Guggenheim Fellow three times. He held elected positions in several scholarly societies including that of President of the American Folklore Society. He was a Fellow of the American Folklore Society and served as President of the Fellows. A festschrift volume, *Folklore Today* (1976), was presented him on his sixtieth birthday and a special issue of the journal *Folklore Forum* was dedicated to him on the same occasion.

Dorson began his teaching career as an Instructor in History at Harvard and then taught at Michigan State University for thirteen years, attaining the rank of Professor of History. In 1957 he came to Indiana University with the title of Professor of Folklore and History to head the program in Folklore. When the Folklore Institute was established in 1963 he was made its Director. He was named Distinguished Professor of Folklore and History in 1971. When in 1977 the Folklore Institute was reorganized, he continued as Director of the Folklore Institute and served simultaneously as Chairman of the Folklore Department.

During the years when he was in charge, the academic programs in Folklore at Indiana University experienced a phenomenal growth. When he took over there were a few courses offered in several different departments and a handful of graduate students. At his death the Folklore Department had a full-time faculty of ten and an enrollment of well over a hundred graduate students.

But Dick Dorson also did not neglect his other academic interests. Throughout his life his devotion to history as a distinct discipline continued and within the Department of History he always was active. There could be no question of his dedication to history. Indeed his main affiliation academically had been with the history departments from the time he began his teaching at Michigan State University and he always considered himself an active member of this major faculty subdivision at Indiana University. He attended department meetings and did not hesitate to participate in committee meetings within the department where he often spoke at length; his was no nominal presence. On department social occasions Dick also was in evidence.

Dorson also continued his scholarly contributions in American civilization begun at Harvard, and on arriving in Bloomington became

a decisive voice in developing an Indiana University program in American Studies. He served as a member of its organizing committee, as a major participant in preparing its first NDEA grant application, and as a guiding force in its curricular development. When Indiana University opened an American Studies Center at Warsaw University, Dorson was selected to give the inaugural address, "The Birth of American Studies." It was an eloquent testimonial to the intellectual exhilaration he had imparted to this "humane branch of learning."

Dorson was always concerned about his teaching and he exerted a deep and lasting influence on great numbers of students. Many students from foreign countries studied under him. Over the years while at Indiana University he directed nearly ninety doctoral dissertations, perhaps a record number. A number of these dissertations were later published and some of his students, following in his footsteps, have become eminent scholars in their own right. As an example, of the ten distinguished folklorists elected Fellows of the American Folklore Society in the last five years, five of them had Dorson as the director of their dissertations.

Richard M. Dorson was, therefore, a leading figure in folklore studies for over a quarter of a century. He worked throughout most of his career to build a bridge, as he phrased it, between Asian and American folklorists. His vigor and his broad scholarship will be sorely missed in the discipline of folklore as will his presence be sorely missed by the host of folklorists both in the United States and abroad who knew him as a friend.

Warren E. Roberts
Robert Ferrell
Robert Gunderson
W. Edson Richmond