Garst, John. *John Henry and His People: The Historical Origins and Lore of America's Great Folk Ballad*. McFarland, 2022.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/john-henry-and-his-people/?srsltid=AfmBOorQLah7br_u2cdwd2q7Igqg2VEvlAYp_wAlUgnA57e1p35VLGYL

The origins of the John Henry myth have vexed scholars since the nineteenth century. Who was this man who fought a steam-powered drill only to die in his victory? Did he even exist? What was the genesis of the folk ballad that cropped up in his name, ever-changing in its details related to location and specifics? John Garst explores these questions and more in his work: *John Henry and His People: The Historical Origin and Lore of America's Great Folk Ballad*. While Garst is a chemist by trade, he is also a "folk song enthusiast, hobbyist, and amateur scholar [with a] sixty-five-year interest in American folksong" (7). His interest in folklore stems from the fluidity of form: "For folklore, time also brings recognition of value, but folklore has a great advantage over fixed art. Folklore is winnowed in another sense. It is changed" (51). As Garst writes, the popular ballad has continued to resonate because it adapts to its cultural context as it is just specific enough to be plausible, but also vague enough to imbue significance across generations. These shifts—in verbiage, but more importantly, in meaning—are the heart of *John Henry and His People*'s long-form excavation of the Henry myth.

The book foregrounds a long-standing academic dispute related to the origins of John Henry. As Garst notes, "Six scholars have concluded that John Henry was a real man, but they reached five different conclusions" (15). *John Henry and His People* is a direct response to John Nelson's 2006 book *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of American Legend*, which claims John Henry died in Virginia. Additionally, it contends that Guy B. Johnson's 1929 *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* and Louis W. Chappell's 1933 *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, both of which identify West Virginia as the state, are incorrect. Rather, Garst systematically

strips away possible figures and events before arriving at Alabama as the only possible site of Henry's competition.

Garst presents a shift in our understanding of the true-life inspiration behind the Henry myth, not only tracing the historical record back to Alabama, but also identifying the unnamed Captain of the story as Frederick Yeamans Dabney, a Confederate soldier. The narrative presented in the folk ballads—that the steel driver John Henry is pushed into a competition against a steam drill by his boss, beats the machine, but then collapses and dies—was vague but still gestured towards fact. In a succinct, yet almost insular, biographical argument, *John Henry and his People* contends that the location of this incident is Alabama and not Virginia. Garst reports that

> In 1887 John Henry Dabney, working for Fredrick Yeamans Dabney [the Captain], for whom he had been a slave as a boy in Mississippi, raced a steam drill. John Henry won but died from the effort. The location was Dunnavant, on a spur of the Columbus and Western/Central Railroad, near Leeds, Alabama. (1)

What at first seems to be a dry set of facts—at home, perhaps, in an encyclopedic article instead of a long-form academic text—turns out to be anything but.

Split into three distinct yet interrelated sections, Garst weaves the evolving narrative of the folk ballad into his own research trips to Alabama before turning to the archives and, finally, laying out his case for why "Alabama is the John Henry site" (231). Utilizing a formal and rhetorical approach that mimics a scientific essay, he tests out a number of theories, people, locations, and primary sources against "the scientific method" (197), accusing other scholars, notably Nelson with his Virginia theory, of ignoring "opposing evidence because he thinks its implications are wrong" (198).

Yet the most interesting of these sections is, oddly, the first, which breaks down the "remarkable inner passion and expressive energy" that move through the "story, the meanings, [and] the musical drive" of the song (3). Having been "sung for at least a hundred twenty-five years," the Henry ballad accounts not only for shifts in musical composition, but also mirrors historical movements (51). Here, Garst juxtaposes the black blues musician Rich Amerson's rendition against the Grand Ole Opry stalwart Uncle Dave Macon. While the latter "is pentatonic [and] can be accompanied by just one chord," the former is noticeably non-linear, recursive, and improvisatory (47). In this section, we see the direct contradictions of musical interpretation along racial and class-based lines. John Lennon's rendition is remarkably different from, say, the Arkansas prisoner Arthur Bell, who was recorded by folklorist John Lomax because he brought different experiences to the recordings. In fact, Garst observes, "'John Henry' is widely known and admired" by both African American and White audiences, something Garst suggests "is unusual for an American ballad" (15).

However, when the book shifts to documenting feuds between academics, including Louis W. Chappel and John Harrington Cox, in addition to Guy Johnson in the 1930s, the book turns increasingly inward, litigating a series of obscure historical facts that the critics had written about, including John Henry's original name, the location of the railroad, and even the possibility of a man beating a steam drill. Here, the trees threaten to overtake the forest, as arcane scholarly disputes are pushed into the forefront, and the reader is given an onslaught of primary source documents with little connective tissue between them.

As such, the "historical origin" of the book's subtitle is much more important to the author than the "lore." Instead, Garst leads with the somewhat contentious claim that the "American ballad is based on fact … On this basis, it can be presumed that John Henry was a historical person"

(52). While some, but not all, scholars seem to agree with this contention, Garst never addresses why it matters if Henry existed or not, or why it is important that he was located in Alabama instead of Virginia, as Nelson argues. Garst leaves the significance of the limited historical approach unsaid. Instead, Garst simply notes that "the legendary John Henry died at various times in various places, all over the American South and in Jamaica. The real John Henry died in Alabama" (232). It does not change the importance or meaning of the folk ballad.

Is Garst correct in his assertion? Perhaps. But, by taking folklore as evidence, Garst undermines some of his own argumentative stances. He notably argues at one point "An orally circulating story with no foundation in fact would be very unlikely to include rare names such as 'Cruzee Mountain' and 'Dabney'" (231). The existence of concrete details in a literary text or song does not constitute fact. The real John Henry may have died in Alabama, but the legendary John Henry lives on, reconstituted and recontextualized in each new iteration of the song and "disassociated from external authority" (53). Garst himself even notes that "Legend may begin with historical truth, but it is free to reinterpret, expand, and elaborate. It elevates heroes by adding wondrous, often miraculous, events to their lives" (235).

The central tension of the book, then, is that the contours and shifts of the legendary John Henry seem to overshadow the reality of a real-life former slave. When we finally do arrive at the meaning of the ballad, in the final chapter, Garst highlights many different interpretations and themes: race, overexertion, dedication, saving jobs, retraining, family tragedy, useless resistance. These are all salient points, and speak to the malleability of the song, but more importantly they speak to the afterlives of John Henry, and the ways that the story continues to be reinterpreted today.

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