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Jane S. Becker. *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. Xv + 331 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4715-2.

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In 1944, James Agee wrote a piece for *Partisan Review* that protested the reshaping of American traditions. Agee contended that the traditional values Americans sought over the preceding decade ago and been transformed, modernized so to speak, into what he termed the "pseudo-folk." These were not traditional values, but watered down versions with which all Americans could identify with. Agee's article, as described in Chapter One of Jane Becker's *Selling Tradition*, sums up the author's purpose for the book. Becker examines the Appalachian handicraft industry of the 1930s and illustrates how, through good intentions, these products came to be constructed into an American folk culture that was very different from its original version.

The rise in interest in southern Appalachia as an American folk culture took place in the early 20th century, primarily as a response to the effects of modernization and the Great Depression. Examples of folk cultures were used to find a way of life that did not center on the acquisition of wealth. Images and descriptions of Appalachia and other such cultures, such as the Native Americans, began entering the homes of America through the writings of public intellectuals and later the art of musicians and painters who sought to popularize the notion of an American tradition. Leaders of the settlement movement (which had existed in the region since the Progressive era) saw this as an opportunity to bring economic relief to the mountaineers through the production and sale of traditional Appalachian crafts, such as tufted bedspreads and hand-woven baskets. In somewhat of a throwback to the Arts and Crafts movement, the middle-class women who led the settlement movement began to seek markets for these goods in such places as New York, Chicago, and Palm Springs. At first, the individual agencies achieved a limited success on their own. Then, in 1929, a number of these groups formed "a loose Federation of craft-producing centers and schools" (p. 73) known as the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. The guild became the chief marketing agent for a majority of the craft-production facilities in the region. In the process, they became the primary factor in handicraft production, controlling everything from design and materials to pricing and production methods.

The guild, and later the TVA-sponsored Southern Highlands, Inc., worked on a market-based philosophy. If the product was poor in design or made with inferior materials, it was rejected on the grounds that it would not sell. Both agencies hired experts in the fields of design and production to instruct the craft-producers on quality and good taste. Herein lies Becker's main thesis: that the traditional values and crafts of Appalachia were reconstructed to appeal to modern America. By taking such a prominent role, these agencies inadvertently reshaped the traditional handicrafts into something more modern. Production methods were changed to produce a larger number of goods in a faster amount of time and new techniques were taught to the producers that saved time and materials. The craft producers themselves were transformed from a people oppressed with poverty to a source of cheap labor. In the process, both Southern Highlands, Inc. and the Southern Highlands Handicraft Guild changed craft production from a leisure activity to an industrial task.

Becker presents a convincing case for her thesis. She cites example after example of reshaping of thetraditional Appalachian craft into a modern domestic good and of the craft-producer into an industrial labor. The book is thoroughly researched but lacks good organization. The chapters are arranged thematically but often shift chronologically and geographically so quickly that the book becomes hard to follow. Becker would be better served to do more interpretation and present less detailed information to enhance her points and connect them to the rest of the book.

Jane Becker's *Selling Tradition* is a meaningful, yet sometimes confusing, look at the Appalachian handicraft industry of the early 20th century. The author contends that the traditional aspects of the crafts and their producers fell victim to the commercialization they sought

to avoid, resulting in a devaluation of the producers, a loss of the uniqueness of the crafts themselves, and an "Americanizing" of the Appalachian culture to make it more acceptable to the American public. The study concludes that, while many of the external groups and individuals that promoted the creation and sale of handicrafts had good intentions, they actually subjected the mountaineers to the demands of the marketplace and turned them into industrial, rather than craft, producers.

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