GOLD BADGE CITATION

DOC ROWE (2005)

Today the English Folk Dance and Song Society awards its greatest honour to a person whom I've had the pleasure to know for over a quarter of a century. It is an honour for me to speak these words as much, I hope, as it is for him to receive this recognition. He joins an exclusive club, including some late-greats: Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Bob Copper, Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd and Roy Judge. I can see them all in my mind's eye, nodding their considered approval.

David R. Rowe (or Doc, as we all know him) was born in Torquay, Devon, in 1944. He attended Torquay Boys' Grammar School before moving on to Newton Abbot College of Art, Leeds Regional College of Art and Hornsey College of Art, where he gained a degree in Fine Art. He completed a post-graduate year at University of London in 1971.

Inspired largely by the 1950s BBC radio broadcasts of folk music and song, Doc formed an early interest in tradition and from the early 1960s started collecting local folklore and song material. At the same time, he started to perform on the folk club circuit where crucially he met the legendary BBC producer Charles Parker who, with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, was working on the BBC Radio Ballads. If there is ever a seminal moment in people's lives, this was no doubt Doc's. From this meeting of minds developed a personal credo regarding the relevance of oral tradition, the importance and potential of recording technology, and an overall concern to document popular culture.

A working relationship with Charles, Ewan and Peggy over a number of years included work on a variety of folksong and drama related projects, including Philip Donnellan's TV versions of the Radio Ballads. But the heart of Doc's work was really formed after a visit to Padstow in Cornwall in 1963 to see the 'Obby 'Oss 'come out' on May Day. Here was the start of a love affair which still flourishes today after forty or more years, and which I was delighted to see for myself only a couple of months ago. But Doc is far from monogamous. There are now hundreds of these 'affairs' throughout Britain, where he has become has become part of the furniture. The Haxey Hood games in Humberside; the Abotts Bromley Horn Dance in Staffordshire; the Burry Man of South Queensferry in West Lothian; the Lewes Bonfire in Sussex; the Mari Llwydd of Glamorgan and Gwent, South Wales; the Up Helly Aa of Shetland; the Coconut Dancers of Bacup in Lancashire; the Clowns' Service in Dalston, East London; and many, many more, visited each year and for which he has become known by the ominous title of 'serial collector'.

The impact of Padstow began a phenomenal and unique involvement with seasonal events and popular cultural traditions. An initial outcome was the formation in 1964 of the Devon Tradition Group, with local people researching and collecting West Country traditions. Here we have the seeds of Doc the catalyst and teacher.

Moving to London unearthed another side of Doc – the political and the urban – and no doubt an expanding idea of what folk culture was all about. In 1968 he was active in the student protest and 'sit-in' at Hornsey college of Art, and he travelled to Bradford and Cambridge to talk to student groups. In the 1970s he worked on the Hackney People's Autobiographies – an oral testimony project based around the Centreprise Bookshop in collaboration with the eminent social historian, Raphael Samuel. Doc was a founder member of the Park House Convention in 1972, a group which believed in the oral tradition as an inspiration for contemporary artists. For them he helped co-ordinate a number of conferences and produced a newsletter. In 1974, as a member of the Combine Theatre Group at "The Knave of Clubs" with former members of Ewan MacColl's Critics Group, he took part in shows which used mixed media, live actors and song to highlight local issues and political themes.

There was more media related work in London with the ILEA and The American School before, in 1979, Doc moved to Sheffield to concentrate on his fieldwork. There he became a full-time volunteer at CECTAL (now the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition), helping to organise their growing archive collection. He also collaborated regularly with folklorist Paul Smith on a variety of events (including the Traditional Drama and Contemporary Legend conferences) and created regular exhibitions whilst working on the Heritage Museum site in Ecclesall Road. After organising the English Country Music weekend in Stannington in 1985, Doc was on the move again, coming back to London to take up the directorship of The London History Workshop Centre. Here he and co-worker Rosemary Dixon amassed an oral history archive of outstanding merit until its funding was cut in 1991 and material placed in storage.

Since then, apart from weekly reminiscence classes at two day-centres in Islington and irregular work in lecturing, broadcasting (including the astounding Channel 4 production *Future of Things Past* in 1985), artwork and photography, Doc has dutifully served as a committee member of the Folklore Society, the Oral History Society and the Traditional Song Forum, and continued to concentrate on building and organising his own archive. This is currently estimated to comprise 9,000 audio recordings, 80,000 photographic images, 3,500 hours of moving images, together with a whole welter of ephemera, books and manuscripts. As the collection has outgrown temporary homes, it has been required to move periodically in search of adequate and safe spaces. Currently it is housed in

Sheffield. Perhaps Doc's recent groundbreaking involvement with Jeremy Deller and the Folk Archive project, now touring all over the world with the British Council, is a step towards official recognition of the vernacular folk arts in England - and who knows, maybe even a National Centre of Popular Culture in England.

And then there have been the publications, amongst them *We'll Call Once More Unto Your House* (Padstow Eko, 1982), *Comes the Morris Dancer In* (Morris Ring, 1984), *Room, Room, Ladies and Gentlemen: An Introduction to the English Mummers' Play* (ed. Malcolm Taylor & Doc Rowe) (EFDSS in association with the Folklore Society, 2002), and a highly acclaimed series of three educational resource packs for the EFDSS: May, Midwinter, and Plough Monday to Hocktide, 2003-2005. Most recently is *May Day: The Coming of Spring* (English Heritage, 2006), with the promise of more.

Well deserved recognition has already been laid at Doc's door. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in music from the University of Sheffield in 2002 for his research work into vernacular culture and traditional music, and now he is awarded the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Gold Badge for his outstanding contribution to the folk arts.

Those are the facts. Now what of the real truth of this man? I have been trying to think of one word which fully incorporates what I see. That word is indomitable – Chambers' definition 'Unable to be conquered or defeated'. Because Doc is always there and is glad to be so. He has an unswerving drive and vigour, made only more necessary by his not possessing a car and having to cart about heavy equipment on those well travelled shoulders

What are the qualities in people that make others want to give them awards such as this? Longevity? Yes. For making a difference? Certainly. For a volume of output or input? Again, yes. But for me, that's not it. All those things do apply to Doc but it is the quality of the human being that is most important here and what it has been able to achieve with people. It is about the ability to share, to respect others, to give of themselves and their things, to be honest and to have the ability to communicate. Only people who possess a true passion for what they do will sustain an interest and drive and be able to communicate it to others, particularly if they are outsiders. This is why Doc is embraced by the many communities in which he has become a part; they can feel it in him and trust him, otherwise he would never have recorded a note. What is more, they learn from him. I remember one of the Haxey lads telling me that Doc notices things that they have missed, and he has helped them to build up the identity that they are so passionate about. It must have been the same with the great early folklorists: they got back what they gave. That is Doc all over,

and all he asks in return is their acceptance and friendship – and maybe the odd pint.

And now he has a partner, the lovely Jill, with whom he can share his work and his burden. Yes, burden. For they plough a solitary furrow in Britain. Funding for their work is little, or mostly non-existent, and could easily stop lesser lights. Doc's work and archive are important. Long may he continue.

Malcolm Taylor
2006