

H-Net Reviews

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Wade Hall. *A Visit with Harlan Hubbard*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. 60 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-917519-04-8.

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Artist, writer, and back-to-nature philosopher and practitioner, Harlan Hubbard (1900-1988) grew up in Bellevue, a small Kentucky town across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. He then spent his teen years in New York City, where he graduated from high school and attended the National Academy of Design Art School. In 1919 he returned with his widowed mother to Kentucky, attending the Cincinnati Art Academy for two years. For the next twenty years, Hubbard worked at odd jobs to support himself and his mother, while painting and trying to exhibit his work which was often ridiculed or rejected.

At age 43, Harlan Hubbard married Anna Eikenhout, a librarian in the Fine Arts Department of the Cincinnati Public Library, and they began their life together as modern-day Thoreaus. They spent the next seven years, first building a shantyboat, then drifting down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and through the Louisiana bayous. Searching for the perfect place to settle and live self-sufficiently in harmony with nature, they chose seven remote acres on the Ohio River (Payne Hollow, Kentucky) to spend the rest of their lives.

In 1953, the story of their travel down the river, *Shantyboat*, was published, thus beginning Harlan Hubbard's literary career. *Payne Hollow*, the story of their life on the banks of the river, was published in 1974. This was followed by *Harlan Hubbard Journals, 1929-1944*, (1987); *Shantyboat on the Bayous*, (1990); *Shantyboat Journal*, (1994); and *Payne Hollow Journal* (1996); the last three being published posthumously. Two biographies: *Harlan Hubbard and the River: A Visionary Life* by Don Wallis (Yellow Springs, OH: OYO Press, 1989) and *Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work* by Wendell Berry (Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1990) have been published, as well as a book of his woodcuts (*The Woodcuts of Harlan Hubbard*, foreword by Wendell Berry, Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1994).

I was intrigued to hear of another book about Hubbard not produced by the writers who are most closely associated with the Hubbard mystique and legacy here in the Ohio Valley region, Don Wallis and Wendell Berry. A great deal of material has been published about Harlan Hubbard's life as a serious diarist so I wondered what could be interesting enough to warrant another book.

This small book by Wade Hall, aptly described as a monologue, provides another view of Harlan Hubbard in his own words. Hall interviewed Hubbard three times between June 1982 and August 1987, and this small volume is, in essence, an edited transcript of these interviews, with additional material from correspondence. Hubbard tells Hall about his life at Payne Hollow as an octogenarian and widower, living alone after the 1986 death of his beloved Anna. As one might imagine, the narrative seems more candid than his written accounts. Hubbard is transformed into the individual, rather than the writer or the artist. In less than fifty pages of text, Hall has done a beautiful job of bringing to the public a very human Harlan Hubbard in his last few years.

Because *A Visit with Harlan Hubbard* was published by the University of Kentucky Libraries, a small specialty press, I expected something about the binding and print to make it appealing as a collector's item. Unfortunately, it lacks the aesthetic appeal to make it worth its \$15 price tag. Even though the text makes this a worthy addition to the Hubbard literature, it most likely would have gotten broader readership as an article, while serving the purpose of introducing Harlan Hubbard to a broad audience.

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