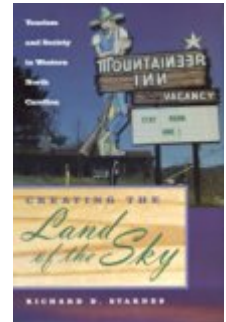


Richard D. Starnes. *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xiv + 240 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1462-0.



Reviewed by Cynthia Miller

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For two centuries, tourism has actively shaped both public and personal images of western North Carolina, creating a region of opportunities and limitations, collaboration and conflict, diversity and conformity. In *Creating the Land of the Sky*, Richard Starnes painstakingly untangles the web of ideologies, inter-relationships, and economies that have both influenced and emerged from the various eras of tourism in the state's western region, providing a detailed account that will appeal to historians and social scientists alike.

Based on extensive archival research, *Creating the Land of the Sky* draws on diaries, oral histories, newspaper accounts, early advertising text, and other primary materials, as well as early fictional writing, to narrate tourism's changing face across time and territory. The region began its active courtship of tourists in the early 1800s, when the climate and scenic landscape drew wealthy planters and their families seeking to escape the "fever season" of climates further south. These seasonal vacationers benefited the economy; reinforced ties with the rest of the South, which would

later re-emerge; and laid the groundwork for the area's reputation as a therapeutic environment for those suffering from a myriad of illnesses, notably tuberculosis. This reputation, which led to the establishment of a range of health facilities and sanitariums, would soon pose a major obstacle to further development of the tourist industry.

Starnes orients readers to this early therapeutic tourism, and the changes in economies and outlooks that it fostered, by embedding it in the ideology of the New South—a constellation of notions regarding economic progress and prosperity that would shape policies in the region for countless years to come. Historians frequently use this concept of the New South to refer to the rapid cultural and economic changes that transformed the face of the southern United States during the post-Civil War era. One of the earliest elements of this New South progress was the arrival of the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1880. The rail system facilitated links between the western region and other growing areas in the South. It was intended to foster industrialization and, as such, function as a harbinger of progress. The results

were more ambiguous, however, and Starnes meticulously unfolds the layers of difference between the industrially based New South and the service-based New South as played out in western North Carolina, as well as the resultant social and cultural divergences between the two types of mixed economies. With both economies relying heavily on the region's natural resources, a move toward one necessitated a distancing from the other. Often this led to the elimination of a significant range of economic alternatives for the populations of the mountain region, which in turn frequently accentuated divisions in social class.

Organizationally, *Creating the Land of the Sky* approaches tourism and society in western North Carolina both thematically and chronologically. Starnes focuses much of the volume's attention on a period of rapid and significant change at the turn of the century, from 1875 to 1930, looking initially at the region at large, and following with an in-depth examination of Asheville, the region's key urban center. These chapters, which roughly comprise the first half of the volume, contain the author's most extensive use of primary sources. Starnes draws on both personal and public documents, which attest to the rapid and complex developments occurring in the area, and deepen the volume's historical perspective.

Successive chapters, however, cover the post-1930 era, and provide a focused account of both religious and cultural tourism in the area—the effects of which can certainly be felt in the region in the present day, and observed through the cultural construction of "Appalachia" in contemporary media and mission work. Most significantly in these chapters, Starnes elaborates on the powerful influences of Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist retreats in the mountain region, which played a significant role in real estate development, the in-migration of new sectarian residents, and the development and enforcement of social policies, such as blue laws—the effects of which

were apparent even as far as the region's urban areas.

Far from following a steady trajectory, western North Carolina's tourist culture followed an uneven path within the region, variously affecting urban areas, rural counties, and the mountain regions. Employment and investment opportunities, patterns of both residential and labor migration, and abilities to form affiliations and social networks varied both within and among the region's various demographic groups, bringing diverse sets of benefits and concerns based on socio-economic class, race, and gender. Key participants in the western region's experiences with tourism included rural whites whose livelihoods were drawn from agriculture, livestock, and timber industries; more affluent visitors who vacationed or built second homes in the region; "outside" investors and entrepreneurs who took advantage of the area's scenic, recreational, and commercial resources; members of the Cherokee nation who lived on the Qualla Boundary reservation; regional boosters, who envisioned the tourist industry as a pathway to progress and prosperity; and African Americans, both local and migrant, who worked as laborers and domestics, or were owners of businesses serving the African American community in the midst of changing race relations over time. Smallholders yielded land to new roadways, African American domestic workers were replaced by "smiling college students," and preservationists began to define traditions worthy of notice. Whether affluent or poor, residents of western North Carolina found themselves defined by the region in which they lived and evaluated by outsiders as others.

Each of these various groups confronted issues of representation, which have shifted over time, illustrating the depth to which the crafting of a regional image is linked to the construction of identity for those who call that region home. While certain of the author's sources indicated that the "Land of the Sky" slogan was merely a de-

scriptor of the scenic beauty of the western North Carolina landscape, Starnes explores its inherent symbolism--laden with images of not simply picturesque scenery, but of rural inhabitants, traditional lifeways, and an absence of modernization, education, and sophistication. This symbolic loading was particularly problematic for rural white mountaineers, whose lifestyles were marginalized and glossed by the "hillbilly" image often used to market the mountain region (and also to market Starnes's volume), and for the Cherokee, who felt compelled to commodify their traditional culture in order to garner a portion of the economic benefits of tourism. While extremely diverse, the two groups experienced the image politics of tourism in somewhat similar ways--emerging as tourist attractions in and of themselves; experiencing restricted access to non-exploitive opportunities for economic growth; returning to and adapting manual skills, handcrafting, music, ritual, and other cultural acts as performance and artifacts for outsider consumption, to be evaluated by standards divorced from both use and tradition; and frequently becoming complicit in their own homogenization and misrepresentation in the name of economic survival. These and other cultural byproducts of the tourist industry created divisive rifts within both the white mountaineer and Cherokee communities, and also frequently disempowered the respective groups. Rather than creating a united stance on the impacts of tourism, intra-group competition for tourist dollars typically prevented the creation of effective coalitions and interest groups. Mountaineer communities struggled to best each other in representations of "authentic" mountain culture, while Cherokee in North Carolina vied for tourist dollars against their counterparts across the border in Tennessee. Many in both the mountaineer communities and on the Qualla Boundary reservation responded with a range of pragmatism and resentment to the compromises and adaptations confronting the cooption and reduction of their cultures and internal diversities. Starnes's work

also examines the partnerships between local, state, and federal interests. He highlights the ways in which shifts in politics and power influenced decision making and project implementation, and served to set tourism, industries based on natural resources, population movements, and developments in infrastructure in a larger context of intrastate, southern, and federal culture and events. Tourism in western North Carolina was implicated in and plagued by tensions over conflicting forms of development. As a resource-rich region, the struggle over how best to exploit that abundance created divisions between not only insiders and outsiders, but among various local actors, who had competing visions of the area's future. Farmers, loggers, businessmen, real estate investors, hotel owners, religious groups, and conservationists were all frequently at odds over the vast timber, mineral, agricultural, and scenic resources of the western region.

While the volume's rich detail is its strongest point, the abundance of information is also its chief weakness. It can be difficult at times for the reader to manage the many overlapping trends and events, stalls and revitalizations in the development of tourism, as well as the related movements in infrastructure and economies highlighted within the chapters. This difficulty is also due, in part, to yet another of the book's strengths: each chapter might easily stand alone as a topical journal article. The partitioning of information allows for a very tight focus within each chapter. However, it also leads to a degree of redundancy. In order to gain a holistic picture of a particular era, or across counties in the region, the reader must make frequent reference to other chapters in the volume. An additional source of confusion is the frequent shifts in historical focus between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both within and between chapters. In order to contextualize events--such as the public sanitation crisis in the city of Asheville that led to a typhoid outbreak, during what was a boom period for the region at large--the reader must turn back to earlier

chapters. This problem might easily have been remedied by the inclusion of a regional and local time line, which would provide the reader with an invaluable macro-orientation tool.

Readers of *Creating the Land of the Sky* will find the effort of managing this wealth of information a worthwhile effort. For Starnes's work is a treasure-trove of dedicated research. From hog drover stands to the Biltmore Estate, and from gee-haw whimmy-diddles to Harrah's Casino, the text explores the intricate answers to questions about the ways in which landscape, tradition, livelihood, and symbolism variously collide and combine to bring the ethos of the western North Carolina region into being, both for those who visit and for those with a claim to belonging. With this volume, Starnes has rendered a range of diverse perspectives and interests throughout key historical moments into an engaging study of the crafting of a regional identity, and thus made a significant contribution to southern history and the scholarship of tourism.

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