

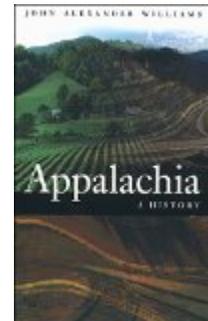
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Alexander Williams. *Appalachia: A History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xviii + 473 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5368-9; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2699-7.

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## Where Have the Mountains Gone?

John Alexander Williams begins his account of the history of Appalachia with a discussion of a locale familiar to this reader: the intersection of Interstates 77 and 81 at Wytheville, Virginia. The two modern highways roughly follow earlier routes: one, the well-known Great Valley Road, southwesterly from Pennsylvania into Tennessee with branches into Kentucky and North Carolina (I-81); the other, the lesser known path from the Ohio River Valley southeast into South Carolina and the East Coast of the lower South. Williams, thus immediately, places the reader in a geographic context, and geography is important in his account of the history of the region called Appalachia. But interestingly, it is not the geography one might expect, for Appalachia as a region has been defined by its mountainous topography, and much of the human history of the region has focused on the limits that the mountains have placed upon human activity. Those mountains have encompassed a region defined by poverty, suspicion, and insularity bred by isolation. Williams chooses not to define Appalachia in terms of isolation; rather he wishes to emphasize the human interaction taking place within the region. This, after all, is what history is. The region's roads therefore become the focus of Williams's account. Citing French writer Hillaire Belloc, who wrote that history belongs to those who control the roads, Williams provides a provocative and ultimately satisfying synthesis of the history of a region that has for long been subject to myth, half-truth, and misconception.

Williams's focus becomes more credible as his history unfolds. He believes that the region can be best understood by concentrating on its links (roads and railroads) with the rest of America and the human interactions along those routes. His account therefore places the history of Appalachia clearly within the mainstream of U.S. history rather than treating the region as some exotic, isolated offshoot, and this is as it should be.

Williams's introduction immerses the reader in the human dimensions of the colonial period of the European settlement of the region as America's first frontier. As symbol of those interactions, he introduces the McGavock log house at Fort Chiswell, constructed in 1761 to defend those Europeans from attacks by the Cherokee Indians and removed to an outdoor museum in Ireland in 1990. This vanished landmark at the crossroads forms an appropriate introduction to his region, as Williams puts it, for Appalachia "is a territory of images" (p. 8).

If we agree that the mountains do not define the region, then what constitutes Appalachia? As Williams points out, there is little agreement on its boundaries. Political lines on a map, whether drawn by colonial settlers or their masters in England, or modern state borders do not conform to the realities of human settlement nor do they take into account the area's natural features, mountains and valleys, rivers, plateaus, and meadows. The federally defined Appalachia of the 1960s likewise provides problems. As Williams points out, political considera-

tions tugged the boundaries in ways that both added to and took away from a region that might otherwise be defined by its natural and topographical features.

To simplify a knotty problem, Williams defines the region using the U.S. government's designation but adds some complexity by examining a "core" region of 165 counties spreading over six states, surrounded by a periphery of additional counties that form the territory defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Thus while the region can be strictly delimited in terms of its political boundaries, it remains problematic whether or not the region can be defined in terms of a unique human culture. As the book unfolds, this effort becomes more and more tenuous.

Williams is a superb writer, employing helpful metaphors to fix the region's topography in the reader's mind: the Great Valley with its high mountain sides punctuated by a series of river basins separated by higher elevations like the rungs of a ladder. Once Williams addresses the problem of definition and describes the topographical setting, however, the narrative begins. His focus is the human history; after a brief nod to precontact Appalachia, his account really gets going with the arrival of the Europeans—explorers, speculators, and above all fighters. This again is to place the region in mainstream U.S. history. Williams also writes with verve and humor, such as his discussion of the origin of the log cabin. "The log cabin has stirred more interest than any other artifact in Appalachia.... Where did [they] originate? We want to know. What can they tell us about the people who built and lived in them, especially about their social status and ethnic origins? Where can we get one?" (p. 104). Williams's common sense conclusion is that the log cabin probably originated with immigrants from heavily forested areas of Europe in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and/or southern Germany.

One minor glitch may be his discussion of the practice he calls "barking," that is removing a strip of bark around a tree so that it dies, then planting crops under the leafless branches. Williams attributes this to Cherokee or perhaps the Scandinavians or Irish Protestants. Yet colonial historians have found that this practice, called "girdling," was common in eastern Virginia and Maryland, and was probably taught to the earliest English settlers by the Indians.

Williams has synthesized the latest scholarship on the region. Williams examines the ethnic categories that are so beloved of chroniclers of the region. While he credits the Germans as well as Scottish and Irish Pres-

byterians with adding to the cultural flavor of the region, he concludes, following the most recent work on this topic, that the ethnic make-up of the mountain region made little difference in its socio-economic pyramid. In the importance of kin networks and the conjunction of economic, social, and political power, pre-industrial Appalachia was little different from the eastern regions of the country. His discussion of landholding patterns, slave ownership, and their connection with political power also conforms to recent accounts that have overturned the older traditional view of Appalachia as a region with little slave ownership, widespread distribution of property, and a more egalitarian social and political structure. Williams instead finds what he calls a "federated oligarchy" through his analysis of the county court system so prevalent throughout the South. Under this system local affairs were directed by groups of men of leading families who monopolized political office. These self-perpetuating oligarchic courts produced a paradox: while the frontier spirit of egalitarianism remained the dominant political ethos, the actual political configuration gave precedence to the social and economic elite. And the county courts were also strongholds of male dominance. This too was no different from the South as a whole and places Appalachia within the broader context of American history.

In his discussion of the years leading up to the Civil War, Williams returns to the examination of the networks among the region's elite. He uses the careers of members of the Floyd family of southwestern Virginia to trace the change from a "western" to a "southern" outlook. The elder John Floyd, connected to many of the leading Virginia and Kentucky families, was an independent-minded governor and congressman who opposed slavery. His son, by contrast was a die-hard Democrat who served as congressman and governor during the heightened North-South sectional controversy of the 1840s and 1850s. The younger man opposed the Wilmot Proviso's attempt to limit the spread of slavery and came to view the preservation of the institution as the key to the strength of his political party. The Floyds' ascendancy as well as that of other southwestern Virginia and Kentucky leaders stemmed from their participation in a network of family and business connections with eastern elites. These kin and commercial ties were enhanced by the coming of the railroad, which further cemented Appalachian elites to their eastern counterparts and helped determine loyalties during the great conflict. This helps to explain why parts of the region remained tied to southern secessionists, while other areas remained

loyal to the Union.

His chapter on the war, “Blood and Legends,” makes use of many of the more valuable primary accounts, most of them available in published editions. Kentuckian Elizabeth Hardin, for example, offered a look at the conventional role of women in wartime—sewing clothing or nursing the wounded. But the irregular nature of the war in the mountains also gave women a wider scope for activity, as the careers of a number of females arrested for spying attest. General Jacob Cox’s *Military Reminiscences* (1900) describes the difficulties of campaigning in the mountains. Williams also frequently cites the better known diary of Rutherford Hayes and papers of Zebulon Vance. Union strategy aimed at disrupting Confederate use of the area’s vital rail network while preserving its use for the North. But to the region’s inhabitants, the conflict was a “dual war.” While the one war was fought on the major battlefields by the generals and troops in blue and gray, the other war was a localized fight among members of the same communities, members of even the same families—a bitter war of ambushes, robbery, rape, and arson.

Following the conflict, the railroad, so significant in determining official strategy, re-emerged as the institution that most affected Appalachian development in post-war America. Far from being the backwater of many traditional accounts, Williams’s late nineteenth-century Appalachia emerges as a region of significant change, change fostered above all by the coming of the railroad, just as the railroad brought significant change to others areas of the United States.

Again, in line with the most recent scholarship, Williams’s analysis belies the traditional view of the region as unchanging, a land that time forgot. In later sections of the book, Williams again indicates a familiarity with the latest work on his subject. Henry Shapiro’s *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978), a must read for any student of the region, forms a particularly strong part of Williams’s analysis. All of the stereotypes and characters connected with the area’s so-called isolation and fostered by the efforts of the “do-gooders” and local color writers beginning in the late nineteenth century are here: revenuers and moonshiners, feudists and local law enforcement heroes, hillbillies, musicians, miners, and coal op-

erators. To each stereotype and symbol Williams gives due attention, offering the historical perspective to help explain the mythology.

While much of Williams’s book repeats and reinforces trends in modern scholarship on Appalachia, in the concluding chapter Williams offers an eye-opening analysis of the modern economic plight of the region. Williams contrasts a discussion of Appalachia’s continuing poor economic prospects with other formerly depressed southern areas and attributes much of Appalachia’s continued poverty to the lack of federal installations in the area. During the run-up to WWII and especially after the war, the federal government oversaw the largest military build up in its history. Much of this expansion occurred in the South, with military bases and installations placed there because of climate and the powerful influence of the region’s long-serving legislators. Appalachia missed out on this federal boon. Apart from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, home to the nuclear fuel facility, and a few other smaller installations scattered in north-east Tennessee, there are no large-scale federal bases in the region. This helps put into perspective reasons why the massive amounts of federal dollars that have saturated the region in the 1960s have done little to provide the sort of sustainable economy that a couple of federal bases would have effected. And it perhaps provides the reason why Appalachia can be finally defined as a special region. For this is where the area finally deviates from the rest of the United States and the South.

This is the Appalachia that remains in Williams’s analysis. Williams’s Appalachia as a unique region deserving its own history is the modern construction defined by the formation of the ARC in 1965 that has unfortunately never benefited from the promise of that formation. Williams has performed a valuable service in providing some much-needed historical analysis of the region and tying its early development to that of the rest of the South, myths and all. This brief review cannot do justice to the nuanced and complex analysis that Williams offers. Through his focus on human interaction and networks and his debunking of many stereotypes, Williams has produced a well-crafted synthesis that should provide the starting point for any serious study of the region for years to come.

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