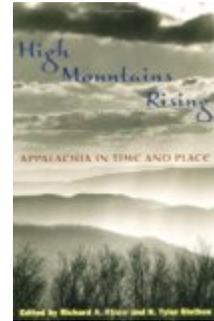


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard A. Straw, H. Tyler Blethen, eds. *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. vii + 240 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02916-5; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07176-8.

Reviewed by Robert Weise (Department of History, Eastern Kentucky University)  
Published on H-Appalachia (December, 2007)



The editors of *High Mountains Rising* have intended to synthesize the most recent twenty-five years or so of scholarship on Appalachian history. In doing so, they hope to provide a concise, topically oriented, state-of-the-art regional history for general readers and for college courses in Appalachian Studies. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge that scholars will probably not find much they had not known already; this is not new research. The articles, however, are written by leading practitioners in the field, whose own research has been crucial in creating whatever synthesis the field has achieved. The collection fulfills the editors' intentions: it is ideal for introductory courses in Appalachian Studies, and its contributors lay out well the main lines of current narratives. As I look at my syllabus for my own course on Appalachian History, I see the same chronological contours and similar content and interpretation. Perhaps we have arrived at something of a consensus narrative, something of a synthesis; the time is now ripe to assess that synthesis.

The articles here generally consider Appalachian history and culture to be regional variations on national narratives. That is, they do not adhere to interpretations of mountain isolation so common to earlier generations of scholars and policy makers. While the isolation shibboleth remains staunchly entrenched in non-academic circles, few current scholars hold to the interpretation that Appalachia has functioned as a region apart from the rest of the nation, cut off from economic and cultural developments taking place around it. If the isolation narrative has been thoroughly cleansed from academic interpretations, it still lurks in the background of the articles in *High Mountains Rising*, in the form of subtext that the authors are trying to address. Isolation remains too im-

portant as a motif in popular culture to ignore, even as it has become redundant to devote serious scrutiny to it in scholarship.

As opposed to isolation, the authors evaluate the relationships between Appalachia and the rest of the nation (the "transnational" perspective does not make it into this collection), both as an image and symbol and as social-historical reality. The authors retain the interpretation developed in the 1960s and 1970s that Appalachia's role in national political and economic trends has been particularly problematic and not always to its benefit. But the authors do not engage in polemics or advocacy, maintaining instead an appropriate scholarly detachment. If most essays acknowledge the assertion that Appalachia has often been on the wrong side of the American story and subject to various forms of cultural and economic exploitation, they also balance that narrative with interpretations of accomplishment and perseverance. A sense of struggle remains, and sometimes indignation, but the essays do not convey the tangible tone of injustice and outrage that one could readily encounter in scholarship from previous decades. Several essays trace the position of Appalachia within national economic networks. Going beyond the isolation narrative (whether expressed as an explanation for poverty or as a form of resistance to capitalism), they emphasize the tension between local exchange and national, large-scale versions of economic activity. European settlement in the late 1700s and 1800s, as described by Tyler Blethen, was built on a combination of market production (with cattle as the primary cash crop) and self-sufficiency (with household "independence" as the goal). This household-market economy, while often profitable, suffered from the conflicts derived from market connections, especially land tenure disputes with

non-native speculators. Slave labor represented another form of market engagement, this time relating as much or more to industry than to agriculture. Appalachia's antebellum extractive industries, according to essays by John Inscoe and Ronald Lewis, especially iron forging, timbering, and various kinds of mining, formed a major part of the regional economy (and use of slave labor), but one which, in the long term, did not lend itself either to local self-sufficiency or to prosperity, as the term is commonly understood.

The expansion of extractive industry in the late nineteenth century led to a further decline of local economies. That expansion was made possible at least in part by the economic disruptions brought by the Civil War, according to Gordon McKinney's contribution. Guerrilla warfare represented a localization of the military conflict, one which devastated communities and local economies, opening the way for corporate investment. Lewis describes an increasing corporate domination, especially in the form of logging and coal mining, with the attendant railroad construction, company towns, and the migration of new populations, as the mountains became thoroughly integrated into an international labor market. The massive out-migration of the mountain population in the middle of the twentieth century also stemmed from labor markets, as per the piece by Phillip J. Obermiller. Industry displaced rural Appalachians, pushing them into an agricultural labor migrant stream, while the collapse of the coal industry in the 1950s pushed out tens of thousands of miners into the industrial midwest.

If twentieth-century farming was displaced in the industrial process, it has also been displaced in historical interpretation. A common complaint made in Appalachian Studies circles is that of coal fields-centrism, combined with a slighting of twentieth century agriculture. I have been looking recently at the 1954 census of agriculture for eastern Kentucky counties; every coal county also contained hundreds of small, "general" farms. The relationships between farming and mining in the coal fields remains unexplored in academic history. In presenting a sharp disjunction between nineteenth-century farming and twentieth-century industry, *High Mountains Rising* re-enforces the perception that coal mining supplanted all else in regional history.

The fate of local exchange was sealed, according to Paul Salstrom's iconoclastic piece, during the New Deal. Here Salstrom makes a counter-intuitive argument (and the only controversial argument in the collection) on the desirability of low-paid industrial labor. While most

people would condemn low wages as exploitative, Salstrom considers the practice to have been beneficial for Appalachia. Low wages, especially in coal mining, allowed Appalachia to contribute to the national economy, by subsidizing industry; wages of any kind, meanwhile, were a subsidy for local exchange? "the company-town geography described by Lewis, in other words, allowed for a potentially healthy blend of local and national economies. The New Deal, by replacing a neighborhood barter system with dollar payments, undermined local exchange in favor of the national economy, thereby solidifying Appalachia's disadvantageous national economic position and guaranteeing a legacy of poverty.

At that point, local exchange became synonymous with poverty, and regional poverty quickly became an embarrassment to the US, especially during the Cold War. In response, the United States government launched, from the New Deal through the Great Society, an intensive campaign against local exchange, in the name of "modernization" and improved material standards of living. As recounted by Ronald Eller, this campaign emphasized urban development, especially in the "growth poles" strategy of the Appalachian Regional Commission. The result has been an increase in standards of living (albeit unevenly) by completing, after two centuries, the nationalization of the regional economy.

While Eller describes the decline of regional economic distinctiveness, he also notes a stronger sense of regional identity, presumably grounded in an enhanced appreciation for regional cultural traditions. In the cultural realm, the current synthesis emphasizes ethnic diversity and a wide range of cultural influences and cultural borrowing. This emphasis acts as a corrective to older interpretations, derived again from assumptions of regional isolation, of Anglo-Saxon stasis. We hear a lot in this collection about African Americans, primarily as slaves and as coal miners, though they seem to disappear after about 1930; we hear also about early Scotch-Irish settlers (though less of Germans and the elusive Melungeons) and about twentieth-century European immigrants to the mines. The Cherokee are featured in the opening essay, by C. Clifford Boyd, Jr., which takes them from their pre-contact Mississippian cultural heritage to Harrah's Cherokee Smoky Mountain Casino. Blethen's description of "pioneer settlement" documents extensive Euro-Indian borrowing, in dress, hunting and farming techniques, and gender roles. Michael Ann Williams's piece on "folklife" shows the persistence of Cherokee cultural influence, particularly in a basketry tradition that became commercialized in the twentieth century.

The essays dealing with Appalachian culture present a complicated, multi-faceted cultural environment, as opposed to simplified versions of culture embedded in isolation narratives. The propensity to simplify and caricature the mountains, so common in twentieth-century literature, music, and visual media, is analyzed by David Hsuing, in his essay on stereotypes. Ted Olson catalogues literary work on the region and from the region; his account bolsters Eller's perception of an increased regional self-awareness since the 1960s. Michael Ann Williams, meanwhile, depicts a wide variety of activities (herb gathering, musical instruments making, singing, quilting), derived from European, Cherokee, and African forms, that made up a nineteenth-century rural folklife. Bill Malone shows the varied forms of Appalachian music, inspired not only by an Anglo-Celtic balladry that so fascinated turn-of-the-century observers, but also from the vaudeville, blues and the labor movement. Both Malone and Michael Montgomery (in a piece on Appalachian English) lament the use of "Appalachian" as a popular shorthand for anything evoking a quaint, rustic, and rural community (typically read as isolated and as racially white). Montgomery takes especial care to insist that while Appalachian English constitutes a distinct dialect (or several distinct dialects), it is a variant of larger regional language forms and not a holdover from William Shakespeare or Geoffrey Chaucer. In "Religion," Deborah Vansau McCauley evokes a communal and heart-centered mountain spirituality; she also seems to homogenize religious experience by restricting authentic religious expression to sectarian Baptist and Holiness congregations. Other Christian churches are either intrusions or are melded into an essentialized Appalachian re-

ligiosity.

It is clear from this collection that we do not have a solid grip on historical narratives that take us past the 1970s (we do better on the cultural angles). The chronological framing of the essays is too wide to allow a satisfying treatment of the later decades; too often the last forty years is afterthought or epilogue. Instructors in Appalachian studies courses, however, could still use the collection to address the more recent time period, by pulling out submerged threads from various pieces in the collection. Although labor struggles appear only briefly, one could combine that topic with the labor migration theme and pull it to the present, to incorporate Hispanic labor, the arrival of South Asian medical professionals, and, perhaps, the recent strike of hospital workers in Harlan County, Kentucky. A twentieth century extension of the "folklife" chapter might also be in order, through an exploration of consumer culture and mass media influences on mountains society, ending perhaps with the recent flurry of retirees to gated communities in the Blue Ridge. The environmental sensibility hinted at in the chapters on Cherokees and European pioneers could be traced through to current activism on logging and surface mining (pulled from its too-brief mention in the modernization chapter). Or one could conceive of an elongated treatment of African American populations (or African, if one looks again at many of our current medical professionals), and perhaps even consider the Civil Rights movement in Appalachia, a sorely neglected topic. A single anthology, especially one meant for introductory courses, cannot cover everything; it is testimony to *High Mountains Rising* that it can support so much.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-appalachia>

**Citation:** Robert Weise. Review of Straw, Richard A.; Blethen, H. Tyler, eds., *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*. H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13938>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).