

**Carl E. Feather.** *Mountain People in a Flat Land: A Popular History of Appalachian Migration to Northeast Ohio, 1945-1965.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998. xxvi + 255 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1229-9.



**Reviewed by** Catherine Kaikowska

**Published on** H-Appalachia (March, 1999)

I owe Carl Feather a debt of gratitude for helping me to discover, finally, my Appalachian heart. In 1986 when I read Ernie Mickler's *White Trash Cooking*, a celebration of the culinary language and customs of ostensibly the South, I easily located in its photographs and recipes my own Ohio hillbilly family, whom I had often heard referred to as "white trash" interchangeably with "hillbilly" and "Appalachian." A few years later I became aware of a tongue-in-cheek campaign recommending the adoption of the classification "Appalachian-American" for the U.S. cultural group with its roots in the Appalachian area. But it was Bob Greene's newspaper column on Pete Rose, in which Greene described the southern Ohio accent as the prettiest sound he'd ever heard, that allowed me to begin to identify my own Ohio self, seriously, as "Appalachian-American," despite the fact that I was born and raised outside any stretch of the various geographical limitations placed on what might be called, by the experts, Appalachia. Carl E. Feather's *Mountain People in a Flat Land: A Popular History of Appalachian Migration to Northeast Ohio, 1940-1965* lays the groundwork for understanding that identifying oneself as "Ap-

palachian-American" is a serious enterprise, and a location of the heart, rather than simply a designation applied to those living in a specific geographical region.

Dr. Stuart D. Hobbs' foreword grounds Feather's book historically, from the "literary" discovery of Appalachia in the late 1800s as a subset of southern culture, to the changes wrought by industrialization that forced the transition so authentically depicted in the novels of Harriette Simpson Arnow from self-reliance to dependence on a cash economy, an industrialization which ultimately culminated in the creation of the "Urban Appalachian." Hobbs particularly notes Feather's emphasis on the magnitude of this transition by paralleling it to that of foreign immigrants: For both groups, their language, music, and religion initially provided a locus for their own idiosyncratic cultural identity, but often, as in the case of Urban Appalachians, also made a significant impact on the surrounding culture. Full transition into Urban Appalachians, however, was not required for the mountaineers Feather concerns himself with in this work; they disregarded the

lure of such larger metropolises as Cincinnati, Columbus, or Cleveland and settled in Ashtabula County, where they had space for gardens, woodlands for hunting, and in Lake Erie "a 'fishing hole' unlike any...ever seen in the mountains" (p. 2). While Feather's first two chapters elucidate his purpose in selecting this particular migrant group and establish the socio-economic history of Ashtabula County in the first four decades of the 1900s, most of his chapters are anchored by a specific family and its stories in which the life of each of the mountaineers becomes "symbolic of the hundreds and thousands of others who came up [north]" and "eked out a tough living with nothing" (p. 63): Ruby Gillespie, who "worked constantly to feed the flow of mountaineers," north to work and south to visit, on such delicacies as her grape pie; Kathleen and Elbert Snyder, who lived their first summer in Ashtabula in a playhouse built for the owners' daughter, and who later began the "Kedron Apple Butter Reunion" as a means of preserving their agrarian roots and providing "a flavorful reminder of simpler times in Appalachia" (p. 96); and Darald Spangler, whose wife Kathern is still hurt by the prejudice she experienced against mountain migrants, but who himself put up with all the "dumb hillbilly" jokes he was told by native Ohioans because, as he contends, "We couldn't be too dumb. We took over Ohio and never fired a shot" (p. 184). In fact, one of Feather's primary purposes in this book is the dispelling of just such negative stereotypes as the "dumb, shiftless hillbilly." He succeeds beautifully, creating a portrait of the mountaineer spirit by recounting stories of the poverty that pushed the mountaineers north, as well as stories of the hardships they faced in Ohio while creating better lives for themselves and their children. Although most chapters are separately annotated, pointing the way toward more scholarly, academic, and historical sources, Feather has maintained his focus in presenting an oral popular history that poignantly renders the experience of the mountain migrants in the flatland.

By the book's conclusion, it is unmistakably apparent that most of these people have been "mothered by the mountains" (p. 231) and deeply miss the sense of family that extends beyond the human and into the very land. This is a crucial insight to pass on to those of us Baby Boom and Generation "X" postmoderns whose alienation from nature is so complete that a forecast of rain, as singer/songwriter Nanci Griffith has noted, is met with disappointment, and no comprehension that future crops depend upon such a vagary in the weather report and for whom "nature" is often but a landscape set behind our vacation activities. *Mountain People in a Flat Land* makes this profound experience of a disappearing generation accessible to subsequent generations.

Feather's original impulse for *Mountain People in a Flat Land* sprang from his own childhood "when [he], too, was a migrant" (p. xxvi). This impulse engendered a newspaper series that served as the basis for his book, a work that can now reach outside the community to tell the story of the mountaineers in Ashtabula County. It is an important story; not only, as Dr. Hobbs suggests, because "[i]t is a very American story" (p. xxii), but because the stories people tell are the real history, as it was lived, skinned to its truth. We need Carl Feather, and others like him, who will take the time to sit down, listen, and write it out for all of us.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-appalachia>

**Citation:** Catherine Kaikowska. Review of Feather, Carl E. *Mountain People in a Flat Land: A Popular History of Appalachian Migration to Northeast Ohio, 1945-1965*. H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2929>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.