

H-Net Reviews

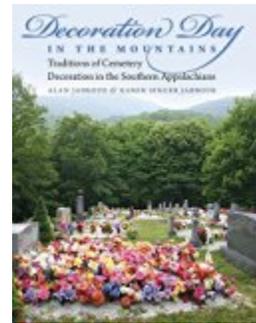
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Jabbour, Karen Singer Jabbour. *Decoration Day in the Mountains: Traditions of Cemetery Decoration in the Southern Appalachians*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Illustrations. xiii + 218 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3397-1.

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Reunions with the Deceased

According to anthropologists Alan and Karen Singer Jabbour, “a cemetery is a dynamic cultural creation, its shape and public communications constantly under revision despite the stony illusion of permanence” (p. 7). In *Decoration Day in the Mountains*, the authors consider the ways cemetery decorations fostered community relations in western North Carolina. While the history of Decoration Day is often convoluted, the Jabbours offer insight into the development and retention of the “powerful ritual of piety” as demonstrated in memorial ceremonies and cemeteries from Swain, Jackson, Graham, and other surrounding counties in Appalachian North Carolina (p. vii). In their work, the Jabbours also explore important definitions and differences of terms like “decorations,” “Decoration Day,” and “Memorial Day.” Overall, the authors reveal the specifics of cemetery decorations, and the role that communities play within these traditions, in one portion of southern Appalachia.

As the authors state, Decoration Day often represents the endurance of the community that maintains each cemetery. The Jabbours visited a few cemeteries within the region, including the Proctor and Bradshaw cemeteries in Graham County within the boundaries of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Brendle Hill Cemetery in Swain County. In both instances, the citizens participated in religious ceremonies, hymn singing, and a picnic lunch, sometimes called “dinner on the ground” (p. 42).

Although the similarities at each cemetery decoration exhibited a typical image of decoration days in western North Carolina, the differences between the celebrations at each location displayed an important issue in the region. On the North Shore, the Jabbours emphasize, there is limited accessibility to local cemeteries. While citizens of other communities in western North Carolina can visit their cemeteries on their own and at various times, those on the North Shore usually cannot reach the twenty-seven cemeteries on the north side of the lake without the assistance of the National Park Service. In the 1940s, the Department of the Interior created a master plan for the development of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in an area of western North Carolina that called for the creation of Fontana Dam and included a stipulation for a road around the park. This road would allow the citizens continued access to their cemeteries after the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) flooded the subjacent region to create Fontana Lake. After World War II, the North Carolina state government fulfilled their portion of the agreement by building a road to the boundaries of the national park, and the federal government began the section within the park during the 1950s. By the 1960s, however, opposition from environmentalists and conservationists put a stop to the development and the government left the road partially complete. Today, the federal government provides a ferry across the lake on most Sundays in the months between April and October, but the locals continue to fight for the road’s completion. Indeed, the Jabbours identify a specific culture that de-

veloped around “the removal and the sense of grievance against the policies of Great Smoky Mountains National Park” (p. 96).

While the Fontana Dam controversy is an important part of the book, the majority of the work places cemetery decorations in western North Carolina within the wider context of Appalachian traditions. Throughout the work, the Jabbours define several cemetery and decoration practices including mounding and scraping as well as the usages of various types of cemetery markers and monuments. They also stress the difference between southern decoration days and Memorial Day, a national holiday devoted to the commemoration of fallen soldiers. Unlike Memorial Day, decoration days are long-held southern traditions that focus on “cleaning and renewing graves, decorating them with flowers, and honoring and connecting with deceased ancestors and family members” (p. 129). These occasions in local cemeteries provide Appalachian peoples with the opportunity to honor the dead while communing with the living. The celebrations in cemeteries within western North Carolina successfully illustrate the cultural impact of these events in southern Appalachia.

The authors’ explanations of decoration traditions in Appalachia offer readers insight into a subject that other academic works scarcely discuss; however, the work contains a minor flaw. The authors’ description of the quagmire at Fontana Dam is only loosely connected to the

chapters around it. Initially, the authors claim that *Decoration Day in the Mountains* is intended to describe decoration traditions in Appalachia, but a significant portion of the book is spent discussing the aberrance of decorations on the North Shore. While the story is an important consideration, the authors do not sufficiently connect the issue to the rest of the southern region of the mountains. Currently, the battle around Fontana Dam appears to be a unique controversy within Appalachia, but not indicative of Appalachia as a whole. The Jabbours might have remedied this by including further discussion about either the federal government’s or the TVA’s encroachment into the Appalachian Mountains or by discussing the general difficulties of reaching most cemeteries in Appalachia due to their commonly precarious locations. As it stands, however, the story of Fontana Dam does not advance the analysis of the meaning of decorations and Decoration Day traditions in Appalachia.

Despite this weakness, *Decoration Day in the Mountains* is an important contribution to discussions of cemetery symbolism and traditions in southern Appalachia. Historians are only beginning to consider the meanings of American views of death and dying and the Jabbours provide a foundation for further analysis into the traditions of cemetery decoration in Appalachian culture. Overall, the work furnishes a basic understanding of the history and evolution of cemetery decorations as communal events in the southern region of the Appalachian Mountains.

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