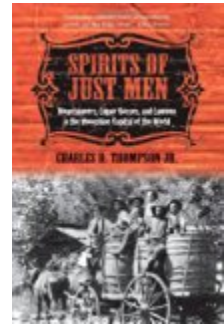


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles D. Thompson Jr. *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. xxix + 269 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03512-8; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07808-8.

Reviewed by Bruce Stewart  
Published on H-Appalachia (May, 2013)  
Commissioned by Steven Nash



Throughout the 1930s, Franklin County, Virginia, made national headlines when federal and state officials attempted to crack down on that county's extensive moonshine trade. For nearly a decade, Carter Lee, the Virginia state attorney and grandnephew of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, had controlled a "liquor ring" that employed hundreds of Franklin County residents. But such a large operation eventually caught the attention of federal authorities, including Thomas Bailey, an undercover agent who moved to the county in 1934. Within a year, Bailey had accumulated enough evidence to arrest eighty-nine people connected with Lee's illegal business. The resulting "Great Moonshine Conspiracy" trials brought national attention to the county, solidifying its reputation as "The Moonshine Capital of the World." Lee, however, would escape justice. Unable to find enough witnesses willing to testify against him, prosecutors failed to convict the ringleader.

In *Spirits of Just Men*, Charles D. Thompson Jr. uses the "Great Moonshine Conspiracy" trials to examine Appalachia's moonshine culture of the 1930s. The grandson of a Franklin County bootlegger, Thompson's ultimate goal is to explain why his relative and other locals chose to break the law. According to Thompson, most moonshiners (at least in Franklin County) were small farmers who found themselves in dire economic straits. By the 1920s, declining farm sizes, soil deterioration, and the absence of adequate roads had forced many Franklin County residents to distill more alcohol, the price of which skyrocketed with the passage of the National Prohibition Act in 1919. In short, whiskey manufacturing was an "economic coping strategy" that enabled them to earn an income and remain on their lands

(p. 194). But, as Thompson argues, moonshining ultimately made these farmers susceptible to exploitation. Local officials, like Lee, often used the threat of arrest to force smaller producers to work for them. "In Franklin County, the rank and file in the moonshine business had faithfully made, transported, and sold liquor, but in doing so they had been pulled into a pyramid at whose apex sat the county's most powerful men who had gained at their expense," Thompson explains. "Those taking the risks at the bottom had little to show for it.... Their labor and risk had gone to enrich the few" (p. 34).

Thompson does not lay blame squarely on the shoulders of Lee and other corrupt local authorities. He argues that federal policies, such as the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act, further encouraged moonshining by hampering economic growth in the region. In their quest to eradicate the illegal profession, "the feds" failed to develop agricultural and industrial programs that would have provided moonshine farmers with alternate choices to earn a living. Nor did missionaries help the situation. They also never addressed the true causes of moonshining, treating such illicit activity as a product of mountain culture rather than a result of declining economic conditions. Both missionaries and federal officials would have better served Franklin County residents by creating public schools, better roads, and more job opportunities.

*Spirits of Just Men* is an example of microhistory at its best. Thompson's community approach enables him to capture the complex reasons for the rise of moonshining and the corruption that this illicit trade bred during the 1930s. However, the book does have minor limitations. Given the fact that *Spirits of Just Men* is a commu-

nity study, the absence of US Census material is surprising. Such data could have strengthened Thompson's economic analysis of moonshiners by pinpointing the exact wealth of these men and women. It could have also enabled Thompson to compare Franklin with neighboring counties. Were economic conditions in Franklin worse than in other parts of southwestern Virginia? If so, could this further explain why the county led the region in moonshine production? If not, was Lee's "liquor ring" the leading cause for this phenomenon? Some readers may also want to know more about local religious groups' perceptions of the moonshine trade in Franklin County. Thompson (correctly) argues that Primitive Baptists had always accepted the moderate use of alcohol

and, thus, supported local distillers. But what about those denominations that had embraced temperance or prohibition? Did they exist in Franklin County? And if so, did they view moonshiners as promoting vice and lawlessness? In short, the presence of "missionary" Baptists and Methodists may have fostered an atmosphere that was not as supportive of moonshining as Thompson portrays it.

Such misgivings aside, *Spirits of Just Men* will serve as a model for future studies on moonshining in twentieth-century America. Students of southern and Appalachian history, in particular, will find this lucid and entertaining book of great use.

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

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

**Citation:** Bruce Stewart. Review of Thompson Jr., Charles D., *Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World*. H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33731>



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