

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa
University of Virginia's College at Wise

John Alexander Williams. *Appalachia: A History*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Pp. xv, 473. \$19.95, ISBN 0-8078-5368-2).

John Alexander Williams, professor of history at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, provides a sweeping, yet critical and detailed, history of the Appalachian region. Appalachia occupies a crucial place both in the geography and the imagination of America. Geographically, Appalachia is a region defined by the Allegheny Mountains and Cumberland Plateau to the north and west, by the Blue Ridge to the east and south. Nestled between these ranges, daunting to many Europeans from the eastern shore, lies the Great Valley. Politically, the region has been expanded to include 406 counties from New York to Mississippi, covered by the Appalachian Regional Commission. Williams frequently distinguishes between the official region and the core, which includes parts of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, and all of West Virginia. While part of "official" but not "core" Appalachia, Pennsylvania plays a major role in Williams' account not only because many of the first Europeans passed through it, but also because of the key role its citizens played in the nineteenth century industrialization of the rest of the region.

In the American imagination, Appalachia has been a barrier to westward expansion, a haven for those either escaping or expelled from the "civilized" east, a place peopled by feudalists distrustful of outsiders, the isolated home of "our contemporary ancestors" or "yesterday's people," a region rich in exploitable resources, and a problem area resistant to modernization. Williams takes a postmodern approach to regionalism that "recognizes that every place is a zone characterized by the interaction of global and local human and environmental forces and that regional boundaries inevitably shift with the perspectives of both subject and object" (12). Thus both physical and cultural diversity play a major

role as he describes four and a half centuries of interaction between peoples and place.

Much of Appalachia's past, present, and yet to be determined future is about roads. So it is appropriate that Williams' opening line is, "There's no better place to begin a history of Appalachia than the bus station outside Wytheville, Virginia" (1). The intersection of Interstates 77 and 81 is a text or metaphor for the explication of a story that begins with the de Soto expedition in 1539 and ends with the bus services to the casino on the Cherokee reservation. Williams has, in addition to his scholarly background, a traveler's first-hand knowledge of the region that enlivens his narrative, and he backs that up with many of his own photographs.

Following the introduction are five chronologically overlapping chapters. "Chapter One: The Roads to Qualla, 1540–1840," begins with Spanish contact and ends with Indian Removal. Williams emphasizes the diversity of both Native Americans and Europeans. "...the European and native peoples that collided in Appalachia during the latter half of the eighteenth century were on each side multiethnic, multilingual societies shaped by earlier generations' experience of warfare, migration, and disease... Rather it was a zone where the familiar categories of human difference — languages, economic roles, ethnic identities, customs and habits, even the distinctions between men and women and between slave and free — blurred and overlapped" (25-26). The history is not one of European settlement, but of a series of displacements (30). Those who displaced Native Americans would often themselves be displaced when confronted by others with greater legal and economic resources.

"Chapter Two: In the Ocean of Mountains, 1790–1870," begins with naturalist William Bartram's discovery of the biological diversity of the region and concludes with John Fee's founding of the interracial and integrated town of Berea. While the people of Appalachia had many potential sources of political strength, local elites remained committed to lowland politics. The highland counties were divided among several states and separated by geography and culture from the state capitals. While their elected officials cultivated a home base, they saw that any hope for higher office would require they extend their loyalties to the plantation economy outside the region rather than the farm-and-forest economy within it. Pre-war Appalachia was not without industry. Numerous iron works were developed in the region. Salt was mined in the

Kanawha Valley, Clay County, Kentucky, and Saltville, Virginia. The Copper Basin in western North Carolina was being developed. While some slaves were used in mountain agriculture, most were employed in industry.

“Chapter Three: Blood and Legends, 1860–1920,” begins with the election campaigns of 1860 and ends with one of the few positive idealizations of the mountaineer, that of Sergeant Alvin York. During the Civil War, the Great Valley was of major strategic significance, so the mountains framing the valley became havens for raiders on both sides. Local issues or patterns of kinship often determined loyalty to either North or South. Deserters from both sides ended up in the mountains as well. Appalachia’s reputation for violence emerged after the war. Partly because of experience in guerilla warfare, partly because of heightened competition for land and other resources, partly because of the Hayes administration’s enforcement of the liquor tax, violence did occur. And the market for lurid, sensationalized accounts of mountain violence was growing. Evangelical churches and social reformers under the influence of the settlement movement founded schools to educate and civilize the mountain people.

“Chapter Four: Standing the Times, 1880–1940” covers speculative capital investment, often fueled by the development of railroads, the accompanying development of extractive industry, labor unrest in both coal and textiles, the founding of progressive institutions such as the Council of the Southern Mountains and the Highlander Folk School, the increasing importance of the federal government through the U. S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the rise of country music.

“Chapter Five: Crisis and Renewal, 1930–2000” covers the “Appalachian diaspora” (313), social-scientific studies of the people who stayed as well as those who left, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the War on Poverty, movements for social and environmental justice, and the Appalachian Studies Association. The Appalachian diaspora, the migration of people from the mountains to northern industrial cities — Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati and Akron — has multiple causes. Workers were pulled by the growth of industry following WW II. They were pushed by declining employment in coal. Mechanization of mining, an increase in surface mining relative to underground mining, and the development of coal reserves in the western United States have all con-

tributed to the loss of jobs. Though coal production remains high, Walmart employs more people in West Virginia than any coal company (346). When the Appalachian Regional Commission was created, Congress ensured that it would not have the political autonomy of TVA. Most of its efforts have been directed toward road construction. "Growth centers," such as Asheville, Knoxville, or Pikeville, Kentucky, saw development largely as the result of highway construction. Governors and "Local Development Districts" determine which non-highway projects get funding. The War on Poverty brought VISTA workers to the region. The requirement for "maximum citizen participation" meant an increasing number of local activists. While political reaction against youth and citizen involvement may well have killed the War on Poverty, many of those involved have continued their community-based work. The results are social and environmental justice movements such as Save Our Cumberland Mountains, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, and Western North Carolina Alliance. Writers such as James Brown, Helen Lewis, John Stephenson, Jack Weller, Harry Caudill, and Rupert Vance have not only brought the region to national attention, but have helped shape the region through their influence on public policy. In 1977–78 activists and scholars formed the Appalachian Studies Association. From its modest beginnings it has grown to more than 600 members [including Williams, the reviewer, and the book review editor] and publishes its own journal.

Williams concludes the fifth chapter with an analysis of government spending since the beginning of the cold war era. This is a period of military Keynesianism, economic growth stimulated by Defense Department spending. "Only in Alabama did Appalachian counties receive a larger share of statewide defense-related expenditures relative to their population or area" (367). Just as nineteenth-century political leaders of the region identified with those outside the region, so Howard Baker of Tennessee, Sam Ervin of North Carolina, and even Robert Byrd of West Virginia (until stepping down as Majority Leader) built reputations on national issues but did not bring defense dollars into their home areas. After focusing on defense spending in Huntsville, Alabama, Williams concludes, "Clearly, if federal funds had been invested in other Appalachian places on a scale comparable with that in Huntsville, there would have been no Appalachian crisis" (379).

Williams effectively interweaves anthropology, popular culture, biography, labor history, economic history, environmental history, and scholarly reliance on original source materials to create a readable, engrossing, enlightening, and comprehensive history of Appalachia. Particularly effective is his use of biography to organize other themes. Much of Chapter Two is organized around the life and work of circuit riding evangelist Bishop Francis Asbury. Country music pioneer Ernest "Pop" Stoneman is a central figure for Chapter Four. Sociologist and activist Helen Lewis is featured in Chapter Five. There are twenty pages of notes and an excellent bibliography of eighteen pages.

I successfully used Williams' book as a text in an undergraduate Appalachian History course this past fall semester. Because Williams is readable, accurate, and thorough, I did not have to spend time correcting the text, explaining the text, nor identifying what the text failed to cover. Instead I could develop those themes and events of particular interest to myself. Williams gives very good coverage to the West Virginia mine wars, so I focused on the Harlan County, Kentucky, mine wars. Williams gives broad coverage to the textile industry in Tennessee and North Carolina, so I could talk about how the same forces that brought the textile industry to the Appalachian south have today taken it to Central America.

Not only will this be the standard text for Appalachian history, it will be the best single source for the general reader who wants to learn more about the region. It will, as all histories, become outdated with the passage of time. Let's hope that John Williams has a second, even a third edition, in the future.

David L. Rouse
The University of Virginia's College at Wise