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INTRODUCTION

It has been said that the people of the Southern Appalachian mountain region are the most written-about but least understood people in America. Well before 1700, early hunters and explorers described in letters and diaries the wondrous beauty of the ancient Appalachian forest and its abundance of wild game, good soil, lush vegetation, and pure water. The majestic mountains and their meadows and valleys struck some as a kind of Eden.

By 1800, many published descriptions of settlers on the Appalachian frontier represented them as heroic, larger-than-life Americans leading the new nation in its expansion to the west. This heroic image would evolve into the national archetype of the noble pioneer.

In the decades following the Civil War, readers of books and magazines in the urban East were offered a less flattering picture of Appalachian people. Travel writers, journalists, cartoonists, and writers of "local color" fiction with little knowledge of mountain culture began the construction of a narrow, distorted, and often malicious negative portrait of Appalachian people. Descriptions sent home by some missionaries, educators, and other would-be servants of the people who came to the mountains from the East also contributed to the stereotypical "hillbilly" image that has become deeply rooted in the American consciousness.

In the twentieth century, movies and television shows and a continuing flow of books and magazine articles perpetuated this inaccurate and damaging perception of the people of Southern Appalachia. Such representations have, sadly, found broad acceptance among scholars and the general reading and viewing public.

It was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that poets and fiction writers native to the mountain region began to render the experiences of ordinary Appalachian people realistically, honestly, and sympathetically. In the 1930s, Appalachian writers such as Jesse Stuart, Harriette Arnow, Don West, and James Still found national audiences for their novels, short stories, and poetry drawn from their experience of living in the mountains. By the
1960s, these writers had become literary heroes and models for a dynamic generation of young Appalachian writers just then coming to maturity.

The decade of the 1960s released powerful new cultural energies all over America, not least in Appalachia, as an old order of life was ending while a new one was beginning. It was and still is a painful transition. By the 1960s, mechanization of the mines and mills had left thousands of mountain people out of work. Young families were forced to leave the mountains to find economic opportunity in another of the waves of out-migration that mark Appalachian history. The loss of jobs left tens of thousands of mountain people dependent on welfare programs. Labor unions lost members and much of their power. Strip mining and later mountaintop removal mining caused monumental environmental damage. Many mountain people were driven to despair in those dark days, but others were able to rally and form citizens’ groups to offer political and cultural resistance to dominant global forces. Citizens’ groups went to Washington and to state capitals to lobby the legislatures. Many of these same people sought to shut down working strip mines.

Other resistance came in the form of artistic expression. Newly educated sons and daughters of displaced farmers, miners, and mill hands came home to the mountains with a burning desire to work in solidarity with local people struggling against corporate exploitation and political and social oppression. Many of the returning artists and political activists were veterans of the Vietnam War. These young people quickly discovered—or rediscovered—that in their home communities much of the old mountain life they had known as children still remained. Local people still told the old stories, played music from “deep in tradition,” and danced the old dances in the spirit of local community celebration. Young returning writers, political activists, filmmakers, photographers, video artists, performance artists, painters, playwrights, and actors, as well as lawyers, doctors, educators, and scholars, appreciated the vitality of the traditional mountain storytellers, musicians, singers, songwriters, quilters, weavers, potters, whittlers, wood-carvers, chairmakers, and dulcimer and banjo makers and a regional society where most of the people still knew how to work with their hands.

Included in the storytelling were accounts of strikes and picket lines, of hunger and violence and death during the struggles to establish unions in the coal mines and textile mills earlier in the century. As the 1970s unfolded, a cultural transmission, a modern-day “handing down” of cultural
knowledge from one generation to another, took place as a modern Appalachian sense of identity, at once old and new, burst across the mountain ranges. From this decade of creative foment came a remarkable Appalachian literary and cultural renaissance.

The editors of *An American Vein*, Danny Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman, have had the good fortune to be a part of this experience, having participated as writers, activists, editors, and teachers in their region’s expanding literary field for the past three decades. Danny Miller grew up in Ashe County in the mountains of western North Carolina. Sharon Hatfield lived her early years in Lee County, Virginia, that state’s westernmost county, which ends at Cumberland Gap. Gurney Norman, the son and grandson of coal miners, is a native of the eastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia coalfields. They, like thousands of other young people of their generation who grew up in the heart of the hills, first became aware of their region’s literary tradition in school and college. It is a life-changing experience for new generations to discover that their own local landscapes, their families and communities, have been truthfully portrayed in books by writers whose backgrounds are similar to their own.

Despite growing enthusiasm for Appalachian literature among readers who know it, there is no denying that this unique part of American literature remains largely unrecognized by the rest of the country. Many individual writers from the mountains have found success and acclaim beyond the region, but awareness of the region itself as a thriving center of literary creativity is not widespread. It is hoped that this collection of critical essays will help new readers, nationally and internationally, discover Appalachian literature and its relevance to our times.

The sheer number of excellent writers who have established the Appalachian literary tradition has made the task of choosing writers for inclusion in this book difficult indeed. In no time at all the editors made a list of fifty twentieth-century Appalachian authors worthy of consideration by critics. Much discussion and some argument went into the process of selecting the authors for critical attention.

We recognize that the scope of this volume, like that of any anthology, must necessarily be limited. Some readers may wonder why certain famous contemporary Southern authors, some of whom are internationally recognized, are not included in *An American Vein*. Throughout the making of this book, the editors have relied as much on instinct and personal knowledge as on a rigid methodology. The authors selected for critical attention
reflect the editors' knowledge of Appalachian cultural history and overall sense of the development of Appalachian literature. Other readers may wonder why many of the newer literary voices are not discussed in these pages. The editors consider this book to be a foundational text for future Appalachian scholarship; hence the focus on twentieth-century writers. Clearly, more scholarship and more anthologies similar to this one are called for to do justice to the many fine writers now at work in the Appalachian mountain region. These writers, some in midcareer, others quite young, represent a challenge and an opportunity for a new generation of scholars who recognize the power of contemporary American letters.

As An American Vein celebrates writers who have contributed to the Appalachian literary tradition, it also celebrates the many small literary journals, the regional magazines and presses, and the dedicated people who created and operated them for their indispensable contributions to the rise and development of Appalachian literature. Since the 1930s hundreds of such publications have come and gone, but in doing so they have brought into print the work of many creative writers, scholars, and journalists. Mountain Life and Work, Appalachian South, Hemlocks and Balsams, Wind, Mountain Review, Laurel Review, Appalachian Journal, Appalachian Heritage, Mossy Creek Reader, Journal of Kentucky Studies, Journal of Appalachian Studies, and Iron Mountain Review are but a few of the scores of regional publications that for decades have offered Appalachian writers and scholars a range of outlets for their work.

Another important contribution comes from the pioneering editors of earlier anthologies of Appalachian literature and criticism. In 1976 a pamphlet called Appalachian Literary Criticism: Critical Essays was published. This little book contained five essays chosen by noted West Virginia scholar Ruel Foster, to whom the present generation of Appalachian critics owes a great debt. Voices from the Hills (1977), an anthology edited by Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning of East Tennessee State University, gathers a broad range of Appalachian fiction, poetry, historical notes, and critical commentaries. Twenty years later, Higgs and Manning were joined by Jim Wayne Miller to compile the two-volume Appalachia Inside Out, a sequel to Voices. The Poetics of Appalachian Space (1991), edited by Parks Lanier Jr., is a collection of literary essays based on the ideas of Gaston Bachelard.

As the twenty-first century began, The South in Perspective: An Anthology of Southern Literature, edited by Edward Francisco, Robert Vaughan, and
Linda Francisco (Prentice Hall, 2000), broke new literary ground and
gained a fresh audience for Appalachian literature. To the surprise and de-
light of many writers and readers of Appalachian literature, The South in
Perspective featured a 104-page section called “Appalachia Recognized.”
The ten-page introduction is an important contribution to a general un-
derstanding of modern Appalachian literature. In particular, the introd-
tion establishes the ways in which Appalachia is part of the South but also
separate from it.

Other valuable new books in the fledgling century spotlight a panoply
of writings by mountain women. Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary
Appalachian Women’s Poetry, edited by Felicia Mitchell (University of Ten-
nessee Press, 2002); Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia, edited by
Sandra Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson (University Press of Kentucky,
2003); and many other important anthologies, large and small, represent
major milestones in the development of Appalachian literature and the
creation of a modern consciousness in the region.

It is clear by now, after decades of discussion, that the concept of “re-
gional” literature in America will always mean different things to different
people. For example, even in this new millennium, many professors of
American literature, on hearing the words “regional writers” and “Ameri-
can regionalism,” will automatically register “late-nineteenth-century
local color movement, Mary Murfree, John Fox Jr., Brett Hart, Mary E.
Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett.” Certainly the great American “re-
gional” writers of the post–Civil War period have an enduring place in the
nation’s literature. Nearly a century and a half later, however, “region” and
“regional literature” have taken on new, more fluid meanings. One mean-
ing that many Appalachian writers and scholars agree on is that regional
writing is truthful writing from and of the region, not merely about it. An
Appalachian writer is someone who writes knowledgeable and honestly
about the Appalachian mountain region and the people who live there.
Life in Appalachia is not static, as some have assumed. The Appalachian
region’s literature reveals a modern, rapidly changing world that retains
many aspects of traditional rural life. It is hoped that the essays in An
American Vein will stimulate fresh discussion not just of Appalachian litera-
ture but of the concept of regional literature itself.

A sense of design underlies the organization of the essays in An American
Vein, especially those at the beginning and the end of the book. The first
two essays, by Cratis D. Williams and Jim Wayne Miller, are general
introductory pieces intended to situate the reader in an Appalachian context. Williams is often referred to as "the father of Appalachian literature." His 1962 PhD dissertation, "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction," is regarded as the most influential critical work in the region's literature. Miller, a generation younger than Williams, was a leading poet, fiction writer, and essayist who did much to spark the quickening of Appalachian literature in the final decades of the twentieth century. The collection closes with an essay by Rodger Cunningham that may surprise many readers and stir considerable discussion. A writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Cunningham is the author of *Apples on the Flood* (University of Tennessee Press, 1987), in which he traces the roots of Appalachian regionalism to twelfth-century Scotland. His insightful essay on John Crowley's novels breaks new ground in Appalachian literary criticism. In this new millennium, both Crowley and Cunningham suggest new possibilities for the region's literature in times to come. Together they make the radical announcement that in fictional Appalachia, postmodern werewolves have arrived and brought with them powerful new metaphors.

Other essays in addition to Cunningham's point to new directions in Appalachian literary criticism. One important positive change in the past twenty years is the belated recognition of the contributions to Appalachian literature and culture of African American writers and artists. Black people have been part of Appalachia since before the "white" settlement of the eighteenth century, but it is only in recent years that white Appalachians have begun to know something of the experience of African American mountain people. Readers of the region's history learn that large numbers of slaves escaped from their plantation "owners" and joined the Cherokee and other tribes in the mountain South long before Daniel Boone shot his first deer in the transylvanian wilderness. Black Appalachian writers often draw on family and regional lore as they create a vibrant new space in the region's literature, a "space within the space," as Kentucky poet Frank X Walker puts it.

African Americans are one of several population groups who have shaped the Appalachian story from its human beginnings and continue to do so today. Native American people have been present in the Appalachian mountains for thousands of years. European immigrants have come to the mountains one by one, in families, and also in great waves. One of the greatest of these waves came in the early years of the twentieth century with the arrival in the Appalachian coalfields of trainloads of European la-
borders to lay the railroad tracks and dig the coal in the new industrial
mines. Now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new wave of
immigration to the Appalachian region is in full swing as people from all
over the world find their way to the mountains, bringing with them the
full diversity of the world. As in the rest of America, the growing Latino
population especially is rapidly changing the demographics of the moun-
tain region. It will likely not be long before new writers emerge from these
populations and make their own contributions to the region's and the na-
tion's literature.

In putting together this collection of essays, the editors established sev-
eral goals: (1) to bring Appalachian literature to the attention of literary
scholars; (2) to gather into one place some of the critical writing about Ap-
palachian literature for use by future generations of readers, writers, and
scholars; (3) to exemplify the quality and range of Appalachian literature;
(4) to provide representative essays that illuminate the work of leading Ap-
palachian authors of the twentieth century; (5) to illustrate different liter-
ary critical approaches to Appalachian literature; (6) to provide something
of value to teachers of Appalachian literature; (7) to offer resistance to the
negative stereotyping of mountain people; (8) to provide essays that are
generally accessible to a wide range of readers, both scholarly and general;
and (9) to present Appalachian literary criticism as a vital part of the
American literary tradition.

It is for readers to decide the extent to which these goals have been met.
Of one thing the editors are certain: An American Vein: Critical Readings in
Appalachian Literature unearths a mother lode of literary treasure that runs
through the Southern Appalachian Mountains, its veins shooting out in all
directions.

Danny Miller
Sharon Hatfield
Gurney Norman
Thank you for your interest in this Ohio University Press title.

This book is available for purchase online at our website or through other ebooks vendors.