



Richard D. Starnes. *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xiv + 240 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1462-0.



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A Regional Playground

Students of Appalachian history are quite familiar with narratives of exploitation and poverty. A cursory survey of literature on Appalachia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals a series of horrifying narratives: from brutal Civil War-era guerrilla warfare to coal strikes in which collective bargaining was far rarer than pitched battles between labor and capital to ecological degradation brought about by extractive industries to grinding poverty and then finally the humiliation of the familiar “hillbilly” stereotype (to say nothing of the “mountain feud” phenomenon that was best chronicled by Dwight Billings, Kathleen Blee and Altina Waller).[1] While recent histories of the region have attempted to escape this gothic deluge, the chain of dreadful events remains recognizable, prompting many students of the subject to naturally associate the mountain South with ubiquitous tragedy.

While variations on a few of these depressing themes rear their heads in Richard Starnes’s *Creating the Land of the Sky*, the more benign (or so it would seem) subject of tourism provides a somewhat different viewpoint on the history of southern Appalachia. Aside from being

a physical space that industrial America could economically exploit and culturally manipulate, Appalachia has been for some time, and remains, a place of middle- and upper-class leisure. Tourism, one of the overlooked sectors of the New South economy, was one of the original impetuses for the “discovery” of the region in the years following the Civil War. In contrast to the popular image of mountain deprivation, by the end of Reconstruction the Asheville area (from which Starnes gathers most of his data) was well on its way to becoming a “playground for the wealthy” (p. 51).

Unlike other parts of Appalachia, the western third of the Old North State was not blessed (or perhaps cursed) with mineral riches, but instead with a pleasant, moderate climate, a wealth of natural beauty and a population always more than eager to accept greenbacks from outsiders. Previous to the Civil War, western North Carolina was a favored spot for vacationing planters from the lowland Carolinas (the role of slavery in the antebellum tourist industry is well documented here) who looked to the mountains as an escape from oppressive summer heat and summer diseases like yellow fever. Many of the “car-

petbaggers” who came to western North Carolina after the war did so not with plans of recreating the South, but instead to convalesce after the ravages of tuberculosis and to enjoy rural idylls far away from the industrial North. Before it became a major tourist destination, Asheville was already a veritable colony for consumption victims, a fact that both contributed to and complicated the city’s development as a travelers’ destination of more universal appeal. Once northern industrialists like Frank Coxe and George Vanderbilt established residences in the city (Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estates being one of North Carolina’s largest tourist draws), Asheville was well on its way to becoming a nationally known city of leisure “built to attract and serve the needs of outsiders, sometimes at the expense of residents” (p. 90).

This trend of outsider appeasement played out in other ways in Asheville’s rural surroundings as well. While new arrivals like Coxe and Vanderbilt were instrumental in establishing Asheville as a place of wealth and leisure, so were native booster-minded mountaineers. However, for the most part these were mountaineers who had achieved a certain amount of affluence before rich “outsiders” showed up. Starnes makes clear that western North Carolinians were not an economically homogeneous population with commonly held economic interests. Indeed, class difference plays a major role in *Creating the Land of the Sky*, arguably a far greater role than in most histories of Appalachia. The internal improvements required by a thriving tourist economy benefited the wealthy but sometimes complicated the lives of the small property holder and others of more modest means. For instance, after the famous Blue Ridge Parkway was constructed during the New Deal era, regulations were imposed prohibiting all commercial traffic (p. 123). This impeded the movements of farmers with property that bordered the Parkway, poor payment considering that the same farms enhanced the highway’s pastoral splendor (to this day farms along the Parkway are expected to maintain certain aesthetic standards). Also, the influx of absentee-owned houses in many mountain communities increased property taxes dramatically, thereby increasing the cost of living in a place where wages remained relatively low (as is often the case in communities that depend upon a tourist-driven service economy). The tax increases contributed to the loss of family farms in the region. Starnes’s Appalachian tourist land brings to mind the point by the environmental historian Richard White regarding the middle class’ viewing nature as a setting for leisure in opposition to the rural working class seeing the same space as a means of economic survival.[2] The

leisure seekers eventually won out in western North Carolina, prompting natives to adapt, sometimes profitably, but not without retaining ambivalent feelings toward the annual hordes of sightseers.

One of the more peculiar developments in western North Carolina’s tourism was the remarkable proliferation of Protestant denominational retreat resorts, typically visited by Methodists and Presbyterians from other areas of the South. The fictional setting for Walker Percy’s *The Second Coming*, “the most Christian town” in “the most Christian state in the South,” is based upon one of these retreat villages.[3] Percy’s sardonic effusiveness on the impact of such communities in the New South drives home the impact of the Christian retreat phenomenon in the region. Even though Starnes dedicates an entire chapter to the subject, he is not as willing as Percy to dive into the subject’s depths. Various quotes are shared in which evangelicals expound on the importance of mountains in the Bible (e.g., “How Jesus loved the Mountains!”), but it is never made completely clear why the area was an early favorite for southern Protestants (p. 116). One possibility is hinted at, however. Like all other tourist destinations in the South, places like Montreat and Junaluska were segregated and apparently most people of color who visited did so as the employees of resort guests. One visiting clergyman admitted to having “found difficulties in fitting the ideals of the Christian religion to the race question” (p. 114). Clearly, race was on the minds of the white southern Christians who flocked to the Carolina mountains. Could it be that retreating (perhaps in more than one sense of the word) to the mostly white mountain fastness was a good means of temporarily escaping the troubling quandaries of race in the twentieth-century South? Unfortunately, Starnes does not care to speculate too broadly on this subject (although the role of African Americans in the Appalachian tourist economy does get considerable attention in other chapters).

Starnes’s treatment of the issue of stereotypes (*de rigueur* in any monograph on Appalachia) is creative, if not overly optimistic. The tourist’s tendency to expect conformity to preconceptions was catered to and exploited by whites and Native Americans, both of whom were often willing to show visitors what they wanted to see rather than the reality of modern life in the Appalachians. As a result, North Carolina’s Cherokees donned the dress of Plains Indians to please tourists while white mountaineers began to sell “hillbilly crafts” that were often manufactured in Asia. Such deference to prejudices created fissures in both populations between those

who were happy to make a profit from credulous sightseers and those who recognized the problem of cultural dissonance displayed by the propagation of stereotypes. "Cultural tourism" was "a springboard for profit and cultural preservation," demonstrating that "mountain culture developed into an indispensable component of the tourism industry" (p. 183). Even *Deliverance* (1972), a movie maligned by many for its deleterious effect on the public image of Appalachia, receives a small apology from Starnes for "fuel(ing) interest in river sports" (p. 141). Although he concludes that the "progress, government aid, and new opportunities" provided by the tourist industry were balanced by "the exploitation of labor, land and culture," it is clear that he sees such developments as ultimately positive. Considering the economic problems in the parts of Appalachia that have yet to develop a vibrant tourist economy, this is probably a fair assessment.

The one problem in this book is small but not insignificant. It is the issue of Appalachia as an internal colony. A major theme of Starnes's work seems to be the complicity of North Carolina mountaineers in using and adapting to a tourism-based economy and he rightfully minimizes the "outsider/insider" narrative of Appalachian history.

However, in describing the competition between tourism and timber extraction, Starnes makes reference to "economic colonialism," a phrase that suggests the very same problematic narrative that he otherwise succeeds in deconstructing. This is only a small inconsistency. Overall, *Creating the Land of the Sky* is an important contribution to Appalachian history as well as the history of the New South.

Notes

[1]. Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Altina Waller, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[2]. Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (W. W. Norton and Company, 1996): pp. 171-185.

[3]. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1980): p. 12.

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