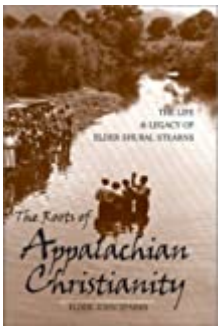
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Elder John Sparks. *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life and Legacy of Elder Shubal Stearns.* Religion in the South, 8. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. xx + 327 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2223-6.

Reviewed by Mark T. Bay (Hagan Memorial Library, Cumberland College, Williamsburg, Kentucky)

Published on H-Appalachia (April, 2002)

Religion in Appalachia continues to fascinate and mystify scholars, as it has for many years. One of the many reasons why studying the development of Appalachian Christianity is so difficult is that while many religious movements have had identifiable leaders, such as Wesley for Methodism, Campbell for the Christians/Disciples of Christ, Knox for Presbyterianism, and so forth, no such leading figure has been identified for Appalachian Christianity. Elder John Sparks, a "technician-preacher" in the United Baptist Church and native of eastern Kentucky, has conducted extensive research through the archives of several denominations in numerous parts of the eastern United States to discover an individual who may serve in this leading role. Sparks identifies Shubal Stearns and his followers as the "Old Brethren," the semi-legendary figures who in the oral traditions of many mountain denominations brought their emotional faith with its distinctive style of preaching out of New England and into the mountains of central Appalachia.

Shubal Stearns, a Congregational farmer and family patriarch from Massachusetts, was converted to the Baptist cause through listening to itinerant evangelists. After his ordination as a Baptist minister, he led his family (who made up most of his original congregation) to Connecticut. Within a short time, Stearns was called by God to travel to the frontier to preach the Gospel. Sparks follows Stearns and his family through their persecution by the Established Church in New England, through Virginia to North Carolina, where they founded the Sandy Creek Association of Separate Baptists. Sparks chronicles the rise of the Separate Baptists as they gain converts and spread their influence into a large portion of the central Appalachian highlands. He explores the factors that caused the spread of Stearns' faith through the region, and details several of the distinctive Separate Baptist ideas and practices such as ˆSholy tonêT preaching and various singing styles, which spread throughout Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina. Sparks also examines the downfall of Stearns' Sandy Creek Association, and devotes a large section in the last part of the book to examining Stearns' continuing influence on Christianity in Appalachia today.

Sparks' book is a valuable addition to the literature of Appalachian Christianity. While he supports many points of Deborah Vansau McCauley's *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, Sparks sees Shubal Stearns and his followers as more of a direct influence on Christianity in the mountains than McCauley's factors of Scots-Irish sacramental revivalism and camp meeting religion. A perfect example of this is found in relation to "holy tone" preaching. McCauley and others assert that

this is based on the Welsh *hwyl* chanting style that came to Appalachia with the early immigrants. Sparks, however, believes that ministers adopted and spread the "holy tone" after hearing the immensely charismatic Stearns use it to great effect. While other scholars have examined the roots of Appalachian Christianity from a "big picture," sociological, even anthropological viewpoint (looking at overall cultural trends and influences), Sparks' work is valuable as a look at a specific individual and specific events that had great influence on the development of Christianity in Appalachia.

While Sparks' book is without a doubt well researched and is a great addition to the scholarly literature on Appalachian religion, his informal narrative style makes *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity* a joy to read as well. The reader can, at times, almost feel transported to mid-eighteenth century North Carolina, and can see the short preacher with the piercing eyes drag sinners into the Light with the power of his gaze and voice. In addition, Sparks has provided a first-person account of religion in Appalachia, written by an author steeped in the traditions of the mountains and their inhabitantŝR beliefs. Like many ministers in the older Baptist denominations, Sparks receives no pay for his ministry and supports his family with a day job as a technician at local hospital. His genuine love for the subject of his book and his affinity with the culture portrayed, shine through and make *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity* an excellent addition to any Appalachian Studies collection, whether an academic library or the personal library of an Appalachian scholar.

Copyright (c) 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

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

Citation: Mark T. Bay. Review of Sparks, Elder John, *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life and Legacy of Elder Shubal Stearns.* H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6126

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.