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*A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright* ed.  
by Anne Wright, Sandra Rose Maley, and Jonathan Blunk  
(review)

Shawn Holliday

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## NEW APPALACHIAN BOOKS

# REVIEWS

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**Anne Wright, Sandra Rose Maley, and Jonathan Blunk, eds. *A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005. Hardcover, \$40.00**

“Even if a fellow . . . spends his life in a coal mine, this does not mean that his sons and daughters must do the same.”

—James Wright in a letter to Jack Furniss, 1950

Although James Arlington Wright left his hometown of Martin’s Ferry, Ohio for good upon graduating from high school in 1946, the northern Appalachian region that imprinted itself upon his youthful imagination remained a central concern in his work until his untimely death from cancer of the tongue in 1980. While such well-known poems as “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” “Autumn Begins in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio,” and “In Response to a Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned” employ explicit Appalachian settings and themes—from the failed dreams of steel workers and hoboes to the ill effects of industrialization on the natural environment—a significant number of Wright’s other poems employ his troubled ambivalence toward the region as implicit subtext, even when they seem to have little or nothing to do with Appalachia directly. A good example is “Saint Judas,” the title poem from his second book of verse, where Wright parallels his own traitorous reasons for leaving the confines of urban Appalachia with the experiences of Christ’s betrayer, Judas, whose selfishness is used for ultimate good to fulfill God’s plan of redemption, an idea Wright uses metapoetically to justify his negative depictions of Appalachia that accumulate in the beautiful formalist poetry that fills the volume.

These uneasy feelings toward the region continually crop up in the poet’s thirty-four years of correspondence published in *A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright*. Throughout, the poet undercuts his nostalgic attraction to home with his contempt for Appalachia’s cultural inertia. While such concerns rarely become the main focus of any letter, this ambivalence recurs often enough to convince the reader that these contradictory feelings became the

driving force behind Wright's poetic vocation. This preoccupation with home remained with Wright throughout his life, a fact that ties him to such other Appalachian writers as Thomas Wolfe, Edward Abbey, and Chris Offutt, all of whom left the region in order to understand it better by coming to terms with their troubling youthful experiences through writing autobiographically-based works while living in self-imposed exile.

In an early letter to Robert Bly, written on the day Wright received his copy of *The Fifties*, the journal that influenced his use of the deep image so effectively, he discusses his lyrical attraction to and personal alienation from Appalachia, both of which hurt him into poetry:

[...] when I was young, I wanted to be a poet like Walt Whitman, and I hated the God damned place where I was born (Ohio) enough to try it at least. To be like Whitman meant trying to be original. I had no illusion that this was not difficult, but I had nothing to lose, and I didn't give a damn about that unspeakable rat-hole where I grew up. (112)

Although such alienation inspired Wright early on, it began discouraging him by the time of *Saint Judas* since it created a crises in his poetic aesthetic. Until Wright received *The Fifties*, he had come to believe that "the images of the slag heaps and the black trees and the stool-washed river and the chemicals from the factories of Wheeling Steel, Blaw Knox, [and] the Hanna Coal Co." were unworthy poetic subject matter scorned by the literary establishment. Bly's theories on surrealism and free verse as well as the poems he included in his journal, however, showed Wright what he had always intuited while reading Whitman, Rilke, and Hölderlin—"that one ought first to journey into himself, and determine whether or not he is a poet" with all the troubled images of home that he carries around with him rather than to try to invent a poetic persona that does not exist. Similar insights about Wright's ambivalence toward the region pepper the volume, which makes his *Selected Letters* required reading for any scholar interested in the lifelong influence of Appalachia on writers who tried to leave the area psychically but found they held a constant oneiric attraction to it throughout their lifetimes.

While this book's publication has been an anticipated event for those who hoped to learn more about the man behind the poet, there is little here to fulfill that interest other than Wright's continual glance homeward. Although the book's first half extensively documents Robert

Bly's influence on Wright's early verse that started with *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963); his own undisciplined theories on translating such foreign-language poets as Pablo Neruda, Georg Trakl, and César Vallejo; and his early volatile letters to James Dickey; the second half offers few revelations other than Wright's participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, his dissatisfaction with the Nixon Administration and the Vietnam War, and his continued congeniality toward fellow poets, to whom he rarely, if ever, offers a negative criticism. In fact, the good-natured, complacent tone of the letters collected here makes one wonder how influential Anne Wright was in suppressing certain correspondence. None of the letters in *A Wild Perfection* directly address Wright's short love affair with Anne Sexton, the reasons for the poet's divorce from his first wife, or his strained friendship with Bly during the 1970s. While a few letters written to Franz and Marshall Wright illustrate the poet's affection for his sons, their relationship remains hazy throughout as well. Huge gaps in their correspondence occur, which raises more questions than the letters included ever answer.

Although Jonathan Blunk's forthcoming biography of Wright may shed more light on all of the poet's relationships, its status as an "authorized" biography, controlled by the poet's widow, may continue to keep such needed revelations under wraps. Only after another twenty-five years may readers be allowed to see the real James Arlington Wright in a volume of collected letters or a full-length unauthorized biography. For now, *A Wild Perfection* offers only a superficial snapshot of a man who is never allowed to come into focus, a poet who never came to terms with his identity as an Appalachian.

—Shawn Holliday

**O'Donnell, Kevin E. and Helen Hollingsworth, eds. *Seekers of Scenery: Travel Writing From Southern Appalachia, 1840-1900*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004. Hardback. \$42.00.**

**Eslinger, Ellen, ed. *Running Mad for Kentucky: Frontier Travel Accounts*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Hardback. \$35.00.**

The pleasure of reading travel writing is in the combination of voyeurism and fantasies of participation the text provokes. We observe the traveler and gain knowledge of intimate details (sounds, sights, smells, and tastes) without the trauma of actual participation in the journey, but with the certain knowledge that, had we been there, things would