Yet Another Look Over the Mountains

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Beyond the sea and behind the land lie the mountains. So it was in early American history, a physical arrangement that was a statement of fact, a subject of debate, a source of mystery. While every mountain chain has been enrobed with lore and has been crowned with metaphor, few approach the Appalachians in attributes and significance. Only the adjective "Alpine" is broader in connotation and more far-ranging in appeal than "Appalachian," which today connotes a region, a people, and a subculture.

Unmatched historically even by the majestic Rockies, the naturally worn-down Appalachians stood in determination of the course of this nation's early expansion. Thomas Jefferson was among the first to recognize the rough parallel of this mountain chain to the coastland, a parallel which also served as a line of demarcation and of temporary delimitation. The mountains briefly stood as constraints to settlement: their heavy forests and craggy peaks—so described at the time—discouraged transylvanian movement and often exhausted upbound effort. As John Lederer wrote in 1669 of his encounter with the "Spurs of the *Apalataean*—mountains": "The ascent was so steep, the cold so intense [in August] and we so tired" that he and his companions proceeded not beyond the summit but did stay there long enough to "drink the Kings [*sic*] Health in brandy."[1]

This was one of many such comments about the Appalachians made at the time when the mountain first became a subject of adventure and attraction in Euro-American thought and literature. No longer feared and avoided as it once had been, the mountain was approached and then ascended, with mountain-climbing standing as one measurement of cultural change in the nineteenth century. Then followed the appear-

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ance of the mountain as emblem and symbol, looming prominently in the pages of fiction supplied by authors ranging in place and style from Edgar Allan Poe to Thomas Mann.

Today, we moderns who vault mountains with no personal effort while comfortably seated in an aircraft moving at speeds in excess of 500 miles an hour, casually accept the mountain as logo for movie or clothing company, for brand of beer or ice cream, as subject of hymn and popular tune, as easily accessible place of winter and summer sports.

About three centuries ago, humans had slowly decided to move the mountain in their visions of things. The mountain rising threateningly, the mountain as expression of the erupting discontent of Satan unwillingly housed in the bowels of the earth, this mountain was certainly not the Mount Sainte-Victoire painted by Paul Cezanne and Winston Churchill, nor the Rockies photographed by moonlight by Ansel Adams, nor even before these persons the Appalachians mistily blue or pink in the background of the oils of Thomas Cole and Frederick Church.

Just as landscape was a creation of the early modern mind, so was the mountain then resituated to become the earthly summit of our hopes and desires. Mont Blanc in the Alps was only first ascended in 1786, shortly after Daniel Boone had made his way from North Carolina into Kentucky along the "Warriors' Path" that led through the Cumberland Gap. The exploration and penetration of the Appalachians was thus of its time.

That time was also the one in which art and spirit combined to introduce "The Sublime." Often described after it had been philosophically analyzed by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), the concept of "The Sublime" commanded the attention of Johann von Goethe in Weimar as it guided the paintbrush of Thomas Cole here. Its effect can be easily appreciated in the following statement from Timothy Flint's *Biographical Sketch of Daniel Boone.* As Boone and his associates prepared to descend from the heights of the Cumberlands, Flint describes what lay before their eyes:

> A feeling of the sublime is inspired in every bosom susceptible of it, by a view from any point of these vast ridges, of the boundless forest valleys of the Ohio.[3]

"The Sublime" as an artistic mood suggested the power of nature to inspire awe, to represent mightily the Almighty. "[T]he soul soars here in a calmer ether, almost above the obscuring clouds of life," wrote John Esten Cooke of the Appalachians in an article published in 1852, long

after nature had been deemed inspirational and the mountain spiritually uplifting.[4]

Such a romantic appreciation of the mountain was part of our intensifying national awareness of the environment, our myth-making that led to an unusual, perhaps unique, definition of nature or "Nature," to employ the more reverential inscription. As Perry Miller remarked some three decades ago, no people were more commercially bent and less anxious to admit it than the Americans who highly praised nature as they lowly ravished its proclaimed glories.[5]

The "course" of American history was early determined to be just that, a relentless, swift movement across the land in order to settle and exploit it. It was, as Nathaniel Ames had already described it in 1758 from his particular vantage point in Needham, Massachusetts, a "Tour from Hence over the Appalachian Mountains to the Western Ocean."[6]

The operative term is the preposition "over." It encapsulates a long-established cultural appreciation in two syllables. The Appalachian Mountains were bulwark and obstacle; they were a dividing line, a physical feature remade by explorer, geographer, and historian into a cultural divide. In the now-famous "scholar's edition," the eleventh, of the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* published in 1911, the head of the American Geological Survey, Arthur Coe Spencer, wrote engagingly in his entry on the Appalachians:

> For a century the Appalachians were a barrier to the westward expansion of the English colonies; the continuity of the system, the bewildering multiplicity of its succeeding ridges, the tortuous courses and roughness of its transverse passes, a heavy forest and dense undergrowth all conspired to hold the settlers on the seaward-sloping plateaus and costal plains.[7]

But once "by-passed" by newly discovered gaps, an accommodating river system to the north and subsequent rails that went around the more formidable mass of the southern portion of the chain, American history went "over" the Appalachians, then isolating culturally the hitherto physically isolating mountains.

One of the sources that Spencer cited in his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article was the work of "Miss E. C. Semple." Ellen Churchill Semple was a defining scholar, one whose mark on that construct "Appalachia" was deep and nearly indelible. In her appreciation of land and folk presented in an essay entitled "The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains," which was published in 1901, she starkly intoned: "A close glance at the topographical map of the region shows the country to be

devoted by nature to isolation and poverty."[8] Her conclusion is easy to guess: " . . . nowhere else had that progressive Anglo-Saxon race been so long retarded and so completely subjected to retarding conditions . . . "[9]

Semple was in a straight line with one strong intellectual thrust of the nineteenth century, the insistence on the environmental conditioning of cultural behavior. The French literary critic Hippolyte Taine in his *History of English Literature* (English edition, 1880) had announced that the literary expression of a people, of the English people in particular, had been conditioned by three factors: race, time, and environment. The American geographer Ellsworth Huntington said much the same in his treatment of the formative, creative effect of climate and topography on culture. In a section subtitled "How Relief Influences Political Allegiance" in *Principles of Human Geography,* published in 1924, he, joined by his collaborator Sumner W. Cushing, explained the dissent from the cause of the Confederacy characteristic of the Appalachian highlanders as land-based, the resulting condition of a poor region where "slave labor did not pay" and where, accordingly, the highlanders were not in agreement with the "slave-owning plainsmen."[10]

To this sort of general assessment of the lay-of-the-land must be added the unusual geographical determinant of American history, the frontier. The now famous thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner has been questioned, discarded, yet lingers about to haunt us.

In his remarkable study *Land of Slavery, Land of Promise,* Ray Billington speaks of a series of frontiers, each momentarily defined and maintained by a "cultural fault." The first such fault consisted of the Appalachians. Traversing these mountains, an English traveler whom Billington quotes in support of this contention remarked: "We seemed as if we were entering a wholly new country; as if the mountain barrier which we had just crossed forced a complete separation between us and all we had left behind."[11]

This remark by E. Stanley was made in 1825, at a time when westward travel by visiting Europeans was no longer novel. That journeying joined the American movement "over" the Appalachians which had already led to the horizontal cultural bifurcation of the population of this land ("Easterner" and "Westerner") which matched the vertical one ("Northerner" and "Southerner") as imagined on a Mercator-projection map.

The cultural equivalent of the Mason-Dixon Line was the Appalachian Mountain chain. The British government had so determined from its splendid isolation in London. In 1763 that government issued a proc-

lamation which declared the crest of the Appalachians the line beyond which settlement could not be made. The so-called Proclamation Line, intended to prevent further colonial warfare, was immediately ignored by some colonists, and soon by many more, its effectiveness ending a few years later in 1766. The decision to hold the line at the crest was unfeasible even at its origin, because penetration of the mountainous region was frequent, nearing the commonplace, at the time.

Yet the motivation for such exploration and exploitation remains unsettled in historical analysis. The traditional interpretation of an expanding trade frontier, moved inland and hence over the Appalachians by individuals seeking to extend the fur trade, has been recently and effectively challenged by Alan Vance Briceland in *Westward From Virginia.* "Quiet the opposite of being heroic," he writes of the seventeenth-century Virginians, "they stood in dread of the unknown savage-inhabited wilderness beyond the fall line." It was, rather, "two spurts of activity," two sets of exploration, one in 1650 and the other in the period 1669-1674, that opened "the Piedmont to Virginia traders and eventually to English settlers."[12]

In a natural way, therefore, the Appalachians early in our history stood in silent support of the Proclamation Line. But all such considerations, natural and political, were bypassed by paddle-wheel-churned river systems, by steam-streaming railroad trains, and by that seemingly national compulsion, westward expansion. The Appalachians slowly descended into our cultural history, the northern and central portions made up rather like a tidy bed, the southern region turned over in analysis to reveal the quaint and the cruel. When Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" was first performed in 1944 with Martha Graham's dance company, for which it had been commissioned, Graham stated in the program notes that she wished to capture the edenic quality of early life in Pennsylvania. When the Ritz Brothers collectively starred in the film *Kentucky Moonshine* in 1938, theirs was a comedy about feuding.

In that beautifully turned-out volume *The Appalachian Mountains* (rather ironically published in Portland, Oregon, a city that views a different mountain chain), Wilma Dykeman, joined by her son Dykeman Stokely, swept eloquently down along the three regions of the Appalachians in a verbal appreciation of the striking and nuanced distinctions of each. "The Appalachians seem to be familiar to everyone and precisely known by no one," the authors wisely say."[13]

Place and myth, mountain chain and mind-set, the Appalachians have disrupted and defined our national history, have inspired a rich literature of site and situation and have engendered a national debate about re-

gional poverty. They have generously accommodated the longest walking trail in the world, and they have been forced to expose their dreadful nakedness from strip mining. They are our national mountains of song and of craft; and they have served as proof—his proof—to the historian Arnold Toynbee of the theory of "challenge and response," of people's ability—or inability—to do something with their environment.

They remain, and they remain fascinating.

"'Oh,' she said, 'That's over the mountain'," wrote the journalist Fred Powledge of his inquiry of a West Virginia storekeeper of the location of the campground he was seeking in 1977. In his narrative, Powledge than commented on the storekeeper's comment: "As if only a fool with a beard and New York license plates would want to go *over the mountain.*"[14]

And so it is, as it had been, *over the mountain,* for three centuries of exploration and penetration, displacement and settlement, depiction and depletion. The Appalachians have withstood all of this; but they stand, as we all know, for no human reason or purpose.

Notes

1. John Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer,* first published in 1672, with excerpt appearing in Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning, *Selected Readings of Southern Appalachia* (New York: Ungar, 1975), pp. 5-6.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Ibid., p. 119.
4. On this fascinating subject of regional perceptions and definitions, see the speculative essay of George B. Tyndall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," reprinted in Patrick Gester and Nicholas Cords, eds. *Myth and Southern History.* Vol. 1: *The Old South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 1-16.
5. See "Nature and the National Ego," Chapter 9 in Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).
6. Cited in ibid., p. 207.
7. Arthur Coe Spencer, "Appalachian Mountains," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* Volume 2 (11th ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), p. 208.
8. Ellen Churchill Semple, "The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains: A Study in Anthropogeography," *The Geographical Journal,* Vol. 17, No. 6, June 1901, p. 589.
9. Ibid., p. 623.

10. Ellsworth Huntington and Sumner W. Cushing, *Principles of Human Geography* (New York: John Wiley, 1924), p. 379.
11. E. Stanley, *Journal of a Tour in America, 1814-1825,* quoted in Ray Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 29.
12. Alan Vance Briceland, *Westward From Virginia: The Exploration of the Virginia-Carolina Frontier* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), p. 13.
13. Wilma Dykeman and Dykeman Stokely, *The Appalachian Mountains* (Portland, Oregon: Graphic Arts Center, 1980), p. 17.
14. Fred Powledge, *Journey Through the South: A Rediscovery* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1979), p. 98.

Christmas Eve

I doze on the couch
next to the Christmas tree in the playpen—
I've committed the unpardonable crime
of waking the baby—
I tried to put her in her crib . . .

Now this unsilent night
is no longer holy with her sleep
and we, her parents, are as cranky
as rusted gate hinges in sub-zero weather . . .

The lights and tinsel twinkle above my head,
it's three-thirty a.m.,
the baby is back in our bed and is almost asleep,
and all I can say is:
If Santa makes one sound
coming down the chimney
I'll kill him!

—Bob Henry Baber