NEWS LETTER

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BEREA COLLEGE

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Harry M. Caudill

1922-1990

When people across the United States first heard Harry Caudill's voice, they were hearing some plain speaking.

"During the last fifteen years, coal-mine operators have systematically destroyed a broad mountainous region lying within five states–Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Alabama."

With these blunt words, the Whitesburg, Ky., lawyer began his pioneering article "The Rape of the Appalachians," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1962. The writer went on to paint for the magazine's middle- and higher-brow readers an appalling picture of life in the southern Appalachians, mountains that were "literally being ripped to shreds" to produce "huge and immediate profits for a few industrialists."

At the time, strip mining, which had become technically feasible in mountainous areas only around 1950, was fully sanctioned by the courts, and even the mildest attempts at state regulation, Caudill said, had brought out lobbyists by the score, determined to defend the absolute right of a coal company to "render a whole region uninhabitable if it so desired."

Few *Atlantic* readers in 1962, and few Americans generally, could have had much conception of the scene Caudill was describing. He therefore–and characteristically–provided graphic details, rounding off his catalogue of devastation by observing that "after the strippers have departed and the rains and freezes have flayed the decapitated mountain for a season or two, it takes on an appearance not unlike that of the desolate tablelands of Colorado." A valley in his home county, he said, where several hundred people had once lived reasonably well, now, after the strip miners had wrecked it, was home only to "a dozen old-age pensioners and a handful of children and their dispirited parents."

Basic Caudill

Here were all the elements that would identify Caudill's writing through the next three decades–the passion, the sweeping statements, the love of his home region, the high-powered adjectives, all combining to produce potent and convincing prose. In 1963 this mixture gave force and texture to Caudill's landmark book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* which drew both popular and governmental attention to the problems of Appalachia. It also, said Whitesburg editor Tom Gish, did much to create an Appalachian consciousness among Appalachian people themselves. "We never thought of ourselves as being in any way different or unique or separate or whatever," Gish observed, "until Harry started writing about Appalachian issues."

In *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* Caudill kept up his war on the coal companies–"coal has always cursed the land in which it lies," he declared–but he broadened his scope, presenting a classic tragedy not only of the debasement of natural resources but of the systematic demorali-

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zation of the once-proud people of the mountains. The author had "many villains," a reviewer observed–"the Civil War, outside landlords, an archaic political system, ignorance, bad schools and worse teachers and, above all, the curse of coal."

"Rich and Beautiful Land"

Reviewing the book in the *New York Times Book Review*, Harriette Simpson Arnow saw it as the "story of how this rich and beautiful land was changed into an ugly, poverty-ridden place of desolation, peopled mainly by the broken in spirit and body, the illiterate, the destitute and morally corroded." Given "the continuing inertia of our leaders," asked Mrs. Arnow, "how long can we continue to function as a democracy?" She hoped, she said, that the book would be widely read.

Her wish was certainly granted. Caudill quickly became the most eminent Appalachian figure of the time, and his call for a "Southern Mountain Authority" combined with other forces to bring about the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission and of the Appalachian aspects of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty. Al Smith, a later federal co-chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission, said that Caudill "raised the consciousness of the whole world about Appalachia."

Caudill not only attracted readers, he drew visitors to his Whitesburg home. Anybody involved in the War on Poverty in Appalachia in the 1960s will remember that no Washington official, no foundation executive and no junketing journalist believed that a trip to the mountains could be complete without a call on the sage of Letcher County, who would hold the visitor enthralled with his stories and his analyses of people and events, all presented in rhythmic language far more baroque than any prose he ever put on paper.

Caudill wrote as an advocate, not a scholar, and he always seemed to have a hazy idea of the role of documentation. Inevitably, as time went on, he fell afoul of academic critics and, as Appalachian views and trends evolved, of many readers who objected to the often-unflattering picture he presented of the people of the region he loved. But one of his frequent targets, former Kentucky Governor Bert Combs, saw the key point: "Harry Caudill probably had as much impact on the state of Kentucky, especially Eastern Kentucky, as any one individual in the last half-century."

Impact, of course, not scholarly or popular approbation, was what Caudill was after. "What is missing is leadership," Caudill said–"strong, effective leadership." A truly unique economic, environmental and social critic, Caudill did his best to provide leadership and to summon others to provide it. Such scholarly concerns as footnotes bothered him not at all. As a prophet, he wasn't interested.

Commenting on Harry Caudill's death, Berea College President John B. Stephenson said: "It is as though a monument had fallen. There will not be another person for many generations who represents his time and place in the way Harry Caudill did. Something about his death has caused us to feel shaken and a little insecure. It is not an ordinary passing.

"Opinions about Harry's views may have changed over time, but he himself never wavered. At one time the darling of radicals, he was later rebuked, or at least ignored, by many people, including in some instances his own neighbors. The severe prophetic critiques to which he gave expression were always born of an intense love of his place. That love of Appalachia never changed."

Looking Forward

March 22-24: Appalachian Studies Association annual conference, Berea College, Berea, Ky. This year's theme is "Environmental Voices: Cultural, Social, Physical, and Natural." As has increasingly been the case, participants in the Appalachian Youth Conference will be integrated into the regular conclave (and the sponsors urge everyone to encourage young people to attend). The deadline for the student paper competition is January 31. For information about any aspect of the conference, contact the Appalachian Consortium, University Hall, Boone, N.C. 28608; phone, 704/262-2064.

April 12-13: Virginia Humanities Conference, Mountain Lake, Va., sponsored by New River Community College. Here's your chance to go, not indeed to the woods but to a lake resort, where you can think about Thoreau as conference participants discuss "The Transcendentalist Spirit: Fronting the Essentials." If you don't really care for Thoreau, you'll find Plato, Goethe and Kant on the program as well. Information from Lewis Martin, President, Virginia Humanities Conference, New River Community College, P.O. Drawer 1127, Dublin, Va. 24084.

April 12-14: It's back! After a year's lamented absence, the New River Symposium is returning, with all its discussions of natural history, folklore, archaeology, geography and a barrelful of other subjects. The place: Pipestem State Park, Pipestem, W.Va. To find out more, call 304/465-0508 (that's New River Gorge park headquarters).

Mine Villains?

The Exxon Corporation seems to have its problems on land as well as at sea. Final figures for 1989 show that, among the 20 largest U.S. coal producers, Exxon ran up the worst safety record. There's nothing too surprising about this, actually–for the last three years, Exxon has ranked at or near the bottom.

Through its subsidiary, the Monterey Coal Company, Exxon operates two huge mines in Illinois. During 1989, out of every 100 full-time Monterey miners, 7.8 suffered a "serious" accident. "The numbers are staggering when you consider the resources that Exxon is capable of applying to the problem," says J. Davitt McAteer, executive director of the Occupational Safety and Health Law Center (Washington, D.C.), which compiled the figures. "Much as it did after the Valdez disaster," McAteer adds, "Exxon has thumbed its corporate nose at the miners and their safety concerns."

In its defense, Exxon can point to the fact that none of
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Berea College Public Relations

MUSIC! Larry Sledge (l.), Al White at the 17th annual Berea College Celebration of Traditional Music, held October 26-28.

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the 1989 accidents involved fatalities–unlike the situation at a Pyro Mining Company site in western Kentucky, where 10 miners died in a single disaster. Pyro is owned by a British construction firm that, according to McAteer, continues to operate its mines in "an irresponsible manner."

Unfortunately, fatal and nonfatal accidents reported for the first half of 1990 were up significantly over the 1989 figures.

EYE on Publications

The Wars of Heaven, by Richard Currey (Houghton Mifflin). Two years ago Richard Currey, a West Virginia native, published a first novel–*Fatal Light*–that won wide critical praise. One of the numerous Vietnam novels of recent years, it was called "one of the best works of fiction to emerge" from that war, one of the "handful destined to endure."

Now, in this present collection of stories, Currey turns to the world of what his publishers describe as the "fragile and dispossessed"–the dry world of the downtrodden and the not-quite-right that seems to exert a specially powerful pull on many contemporary West Virginia writers (a notable example being the late Breece D'J Pancake). A locomotive engineer and an epileptic here join more standard types like embattled coal miners (who are treated by Currey in an unusual, almost lyrical fashion in the story "Believer's Flood").

Half of the book is taken up by a novella involving a sort of Depression-era Appalachian Candide, a character who could come from the movie *King of Hearts* (he even spends time in an asylum); Chaplinesque, the publishers call him, and that seems fair enough, too. The inspired simpleton who just wants to even out life's inequities and is understood by nobody around him is one of the oldest of all literary figures; it's interesting to see him in this incarnation.

A minor note: In an era in which people tend to substitute *lay* for *lie,* Currey rather surprisingly does it the other way, as in "lie the baby down here." Otherwise, he's a highly meticulous writer.

As Far As the Eye Can See, by David Brill (Rutledge Hill Press, 513 Third Avenue South, Nashville, Tenn. 37210). On September 27, 1979, a young man not long out of college climbed to the mile-high summit of Mount Katahdin, in central Maine. Five months earlier he had begun his 2,100-mile trek of the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain in Georgia. In this book, subtitled "Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker," he looks back at those months of adventure and what they have meant to him in the ensuing years.

Of all the trail's gifts, Brill says, none was more precious than friendship with men and women united by a love of nature, ties that grew naturally in a context inviting talk of "love, death, God, spirit, nature." The society of through-hikers (as contrasted with weekenders) formed what one of them termed a "linear community" predicated on trust, fellowship and sharing. And this community existed in a world in which the seasons changed in a linear fashion–vertically–as well as temporally.

Not everybody encountered on the trail proved to be deserving of trust. In the southern segments (shades of *Deliverance!),* hikers sometimes seemed to arouse the ire of locals. On a couple of occasions, the drink-inspired behavior of gun-toting "yokels" and "rogues" was literally menacing. In Pennsylvania, on the other hand, one drab town (the trail is not always on the mountaintops) not only welcomed hikers but treated them as honored guests, giving them tokens for free beers and requiring them to entertain bar patrons by playing the "boom-pa," a bizarre homemade instrument that produced little more than bangs and crashes. In general, the author and his fellow hikers came to believe that "the quality of people increases in proportion to the distance from the nearest road and the difficulty of the terrain."

After four months on the trail, Brill found himself viewing hikers as a group distinct from all others. In a Thoreauvian passage he said at the time: "I no longer leave society to visit the woods. Rather, I leave the woods to visit

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society." A few days later, as if to prove the point, he found himself almost gagging as he stood in a grocery-store checkout line–the smells emanating from his showered and lotioned fellow customers were overwhelming.

After Brill returned to the conventional world, he was advised by a well-meaning job counselor not to make any mention in his resume of his Appalachian Trail adventure. Nobody, said the counselor, would see much value in this kind of hiking experience. But such prospective employers would have been quite wrong. "The trail had shaped me," says Brill, teaching unforgettable lessons on "survival, kindness, strength, friendship, courage, perseverance, and the ways of nature." He also had lots of fun, of course, and his inviting description of his trek is bound to arouse thoughts of mountain adventure in many a sedentary soul.

Soft Covers for Hard Times: Quiltmaking and the Great Depression, by Merikay Waldvogel (Rutledge Hill Press). As one of the vast range of its effects, the Great Depression drove many Americans back toward old-fashioned ways of life, based on making do with less. Hence quiltmaking, with an emphasis on using scraps of material–worn-out overalls, curtains and clothes, feed and flour sacks–was among the do-it-yourself crafts enjoying a boom. Indeed, few surviving artifacts are so closely tied to the whole Depression experience as are quilts. For those born in later years, quilts can thus constitute a lesson in social and economic as well as esthetic history.

Soft Covers for Hard Times tells the story of quiltmaking during the Depression years, complete with interviews with quiltmakers from the period. Why the title? The author (who previously was co-author of *The Quilts of Tennessee*) tells us that 1930s quilts, with their soft, designer pastel colors, suggested the idea; nothing about the appearance of these quilts suggested that they were the products of hard times. This, we are told, did not happen by accident.

The book is complete technically as well as esthetically and historically, with patterns, information on methods of construction, instructions for dating quilts, and so on. Visually, you'll find it irresistible, even if you don't spend much time sitting around thinking about quilts.

Coal, Class, and Color, by Joe William Trotter, Jr. (University of Illinois Press). The three C-words of this book's title admirably sum up what the author set out to do with his subjects–black coal miners in southern West Virginia in the period from 1915 to 1932. How, he asks, were these men transformed from rural agricultural workers into members of the industrial labor force–the working class?

It was a complex process, of course, and it holds special interest because it took place in an area that experienced a great industrial transformation without an accompanying urban transformation. Thus, as the author comments, it presents a picture of black life differing from both the southern-rural and the northern-urban patterns.

This study covers nine counties that at the time accounted for about 70 percent of West Virginia coal production and thus of about 18 percent of U.S. production. In this busy area black communities underwent rapid growth, adding churches, fraternal orders, mutual-benefit associations, weekly newspapers and a variety of political and civil-rights organizations. But, though Trotter makes extensive use of material from interviews, he is not interested in presenting scenes from the past. His aim is analytical; he seeks to show the "proletarianization" process at work, as it followed the "classical Marxist formulation" whereby black artisans, in becoming industrial workers, lost their previous autonomy. Since most of these men had previously been sharecroppers and farm laborers, one may wonder how much real autonomy they had possessed. But the author makes clear that they were doing something more than simply moving from one place to another and one kind of employment to another. Although the "proletarianization of Afro-Americans in the coalfields was a highly exploitative process," he says, the workers at the same time took a hand in shaping their own experience. Whatever one's theoretical viewpoint may be, their story is not a simple one.

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