Summer 1998

Review of Branch and Philippon's "The Height of our Mountains: Nature Writing from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley"

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Recommended Citation
Previously published in Appalachian Heritage, Summer 1998, 26(3), 68-70
The attention given to nature writing in the past two decades has intensified dramatically, so much so that it now forms an increasingly distinct discipline of literary study. What once was the topic of an occasional "special offerings" course is now the center of graduate concentrations and even programs. With this progression comes the creation of such works as Michael P. Branch and Daniel J. Philippon's *The Height of Our Mountains*. This anthology focuses on Virginia's Blue Ridge and Shenandoah Valley, drawing selections from seventy writers ranging from the colonial period to the present.

That the work seeks an academic audience is immediately evident. Following a foreword by distinguished environmentalist John Elder, the editors present an extensive scholarly introduction putting forth a clear ideological statement of their approach to nature writing as a discipline. It succinctly sketches the academic considerations that customarily define the field and, in distinction, arranges the broadened boundaries for the editors' own choices. Most notably, they extend beyond that form most closely associated with nature writing, the personal essay, to include not only the more intuitive additions such as journals, discovery narratives, and travel writing, but even fictional works grounded in the region. In fact, the only exclusion based on genre is that all the works included are prose—and that with the admission that "regional nature poetry . . . could easily fill another volume." Given the fine geographical focus of the book, to risk the error of breadth seems the better choice.

Not only does the introduction identify Branch and Philippon's positions within the scholarly discussion, but, just as importantly, it serves as an excellent entry to the field for the student or general reader who may have read considerably in the area but who is only beginning to make his or her way around the academic study of nature writing. To this end, the editors present some of the specialized terminology of their discipline, defining and discussing such terms as "bioregionalism," "sense of place," "constructivist," and "essentialist." And as they do so, directly and indirectly, they provide initial familiarity with some of the major thinkers in their discipline, such writers as Rick Bass, Barry Lopez, Wes Jackson, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry.

Serious scholarly intention is further revealed in the apparatus the editors provide. Not only is each writer introduced by a biographical headnote, but the body of the anthology is followed by an index, 35 pages of notes on the various texts, and a 12-page bibliographical essay centering on works not chosen for inclusion. The book's usefulness as a classroom resource is further enhanced by extensive suggestions for additional reading, and, significantly, by an appendix of literary forms which serves as an additional table of contents by genre. Clearly this book could be used in courses in regional studies or in nature writing, at the graduate level or, with care, for upper level undergraduates.

For most readers, however, it is through the strength of the selections themselves and the relationships among them that the collection succeeds
or fails, and this book does a good deal of the former and a bit of the latter. Selections from Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Earl Hamner’s *On Spencer’s Mountain*, and Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are as powerful as they were in their original settings. But then again, they are engaging, at least in part, because we are familiar with those settings. Other selections are engaging because of their relative obscurity, coupled with the historical importance—if not the literary abilities—of the writers. It is intriguing to read the complaints of the King of France on his Shenandoah Valley holiday, to learn the ornithological expertise of Theodore Roosevelt, or to experience the way the war in Vietnam intruded on the mountain retreat of Washington journalist Charles Seib. Less engaging are selections from a handful of writers who, while rightly included (given the book’s focus), have neither the intrinsic power to engage us as quickly as brief selections necessarily demand, nor the historical familiarity to make their works interesting despite a lack of literary merit. While all or many of these writers may be excellent in larger doses, the single thematic commonality—that they deal in some way with the region under study—is sometimes insufficient to maintain our sincere interest.

But compensations abound. To begin, the descriptions of certain natural and human phenomena create continuities which interest us regardless of whether a particular writer fails to engage. Perceptions of the Natural Bridge, for example, develop a cumulative power, and the more the perspectives differ, the better. Too, certain political progressions, such as the creation of the Shenandoah National Forest, allow selections to become mutually enriching which might not have engaged us alone. And if some of the relatively obscure writers might just as well have remained obscure, the opposite is also true: we owe Branch and Philippon our thanks for rescuing from relative obscurity such superb pieces as Archibald Alexander’s “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” Havilah Babcock’s “Hunting Bee Trees,” and the selections from *The Journal of John Fontaine*.

In sum, despite the occasional lapse, this collection is a superb addition to the literature of the Appalachian region. And as a focused scholarly introduction to the nature writing of a region, it presents an excellent model and exercises it with exemplary rigor.

—William Jolliff