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# Book Review of Robert Morgan's Nonfiction Books

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nation's cities. When speaking of foreign-born immigrants, Conn observes that "[y]ou can get good cannoli in Cleveland, but not in Columbus" (218), yet he overlooks the fact that you can get good cornbread in the Appalachian neighborhoods of Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Columbus.

The strength of *Americans against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* is the nuance it adds to our understanding of how cities and regions were imagined during the last century. Powerful forces beyond local color writers, missionaries, and governmental programs were clearly at work shaping popular perceptions of Appalachia and its people.

Another historian, Henry Shapiro, once noted that the region is perhaps best understood not in terms of past and present, but in terms of rural and urban (Shapiro 1986). That's why Conn's book is relevant to Appalachian studies—it describes the development of American attitudes toward both urban *and* rural places, and there's an abundance of Appalachians in both.

## Reference

Shapiro, Henry D. 1986. *Appalachia on our mind: The Southern mountains and mountaineers in the American consciousness, 1870–1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

*Phillip J. Obermiller frequently contributes to the Appalachian conversation on urban and demographic topics.*

## ***Boone: A Biography***

Robert Morgan

Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2008; 538 pp.

## ***Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion***

Robert Morgan

Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2012; 496 pp.

An evanescent spirit of the past is present at the core of much of Robert Morgan's poetry, and a keen historical consciousness infuses his fiction. To Morgan, though, imaginative approaches to understanding the principal setting in virtually all his literary works (Appalachia) and the central theme of those works (the unique experience of living in Appalachia) ultimately proved limiting. After achieving considerable literary success in poetry and fiction through interpreting Appalachia from literary perspectives, Morgan yearned to explore the interactions of actual rather than fictional characters in a regional context. The characters who particularly interested him were historical figures of national significance whose renowned deeds on the Appalachian frontier had haunted him since his boyhood. It was therefore inevitable that, in his quest to understand the motivations of distinctively Appalachian yet indisputably national heroes, Morgan would turn to

nonfiction. This mode of expression would allow him to ply his narrative and literary skills in service to the telling of stories of public ownership.

Morgan's effort to understand American heroes of provably Appalachian backgrounds has thus far culminated in the publication of two nonfiction books: *Boone: A Biography* and *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion*. These are textured works of scholarship, containing cross-referenced interpretations of the lives and deeds of historical figures affiliated with late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Appalachia. The former book, of course, chronicles the experiences of the frontier hero Daniel Boone, while the latter book interweaves stories about such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, David Crockett, Sam Houston, and James K. Polk. At another level, Morgan's two nonfiction books offered the author the opportunity and the challenge to explore the fact-bound Appalachian frontier as opposed to one that has been artistically constructed.

Morgan's realization of his need to turn to nonfiction occurred during the composition of his 2003 novel *Brave Enemies*, a work that depicted the backcountry exploits of Revolutionary War soldiers (Morgan 2003). In writing this novel, Morgan rightly recognized that narratives based on historical events need to honor facts, but he also understood that such stories hold considerable mythic value. For an accomplished, imaginative writer like Morgan, revisiting stories defined by existing documentation would pose a particular challenge, necessitating a balance between narrative and expository modes of discourse. Morgan's success in achieving such a balance can be illustrated through reference to the fact that *Boone* received accolades in more or less equal measure from literary critics and historians.

Many Americans of Morgan's generation were drawn to Boone after witnessing the media's romanticized portrayal of that frontier hero (primarily conveyed through the hit 1960s-era television show starring Fess Parker, which was an effort to tap into the national audience that Parker had garnered in the 1950s by portraying another Appalachian hero, Davy Crockett). Obviously reflecting representations of Boone circulating in American popular culture, Morgan's perspective was ultimately a personal one shaped after hearing his father tell Boone-related stories and anecdotes while the author was growing up in western North Carolina. Morgan's family believed there was direct kinship between their ancestors and Boone—Boone's mother was named Sarah Morgan. While his research never identified close genealogical ties between the families, Morgan nonetheless felt profound psychic connection to Boone and, in his biographical study, decided to add to the already voluminous written interpretations of that historical figure.

In his introduction to *Boone*, Morgan identifies the contributions of earlier biographers toward constructing (John Filson, Reverend Timothy

Flint), correcting (Reverend John Mason Peck, Lyman Copeland Draper), or deconstructing (Archibald Henderson) the widely held romanticized images of Boone. Morgan also acknowledges the brilliant biographical work by such twentieth-century Boone scholars as John Bakeless, John Mack Faragher, and Michael Lofaro. When Morgan challenges particular notions about Boone of such scholars, he does so without the vitriol of many academic historians, suggesting that Morgan sees his own biography of Boone as being in collaboration rather than in competition with these other scholars.

Morgan makes several noteworthy contributions to Boone scholarship. Elaborating upon a biographical detail overlooked by previous scholars, he explores the important yet overlooked role of freemasonry in Boone's life. Morgan's most perceptive scholarly contribution, however, is his assessment of Boone's impact on such authors as William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, and on such visual artists as Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederick Church, and George Caleb Bingham. In recognizing and tracing the "anxiety of influence" of Boone on a range of British and American artistic figures, Morgan extends the relevance of Boone. Morgan suggests that Boone should not only be viewed as an Appalachian frontier hero, but also as an internationally relevant culture figure.

As impressive as *Boone* was in balancing narrative command and contextualization (as evidence of the latter, the book features thirty-seven pages of research citations), Morgan's next nonfiction book, *Lions of the West*, is, in some respects, a greater achievement. To write *Boone*, Morgan needed to interpret the consciousness of one person. *Lions of the West*, though, required its author to tell multiple historical narratives and to represent simultaneously a host of consciousnesses. Put another way, while *Boone* is a biography of a singular historical figure, *Lions of the West* is a history of an entire nation during one crucial phase in its development. Proving equal to that daunting task, Morgan, in this later book, exhibits comprehensive and, at times, innovative scholarship: the citation notes, indicating references to a wide range of scholarly and archival sources, amass forty-two pages, and, as an example of the latter, Morgan's discussion of the Mexican War often draws perspectives from Mexican historians. By taking such a stance, Morgan acknowledges the existence of other opinions regarding how the struggles over the control of Texas might be interpreted.

While largely based on secondary sources, *Lions of the West* makes a solid contribution by virtue of its graceful melding of diverse historical materials and its authoritative storytelling. Indeed, the book lucidly draws connections between disparate historical figures whose lives intersected in matters of national expansion and legislation but who otherwise had little in common in terms of personal experiences or political philosophies.

"The West" in the book's title refers to the post-Revolution southern US territory west of the Appalachian crest and extending into present-day Texas (an area historically called "the Old Southwest"). Devoting individual chapters to such well-known denizens of the "West" as Crockett, Jackson, Polk, and a chapter on the heretofore neglected figure of Nicholas P. Trist (a key US diplomat during the Mexican War who was also related to Thomas Jefferson by marriage), Morgan, in *Lions of the West*, builds upon the historical coverage of Boone by exploring a later phase of American history—the first four decades of the nineteenth century. It was during this period that restless people from Appalachia and the Old Southwest, compelled to venture farther westward because of overcrowding in settled areas and the possibility of riches in unclaimed territory, relocated to Texas and other areas west of the Mississippi River. Hence, *Lions of the West* links eighteenth-century Appalachian frontier history with the settling of the true US Southwest and the usurpation of Texas within the United States boundary after the Mexican War. That conflict has often been depicted as a contest embodying the inevitable spread of a nation imbued with the powers of Manifest Destiny, yet Morgan's account of the Mexican War is commendably balanced, even nuanced. While he clearly respects the American leaders who settled "the West," Morgan resists romanticizing them; instead, he sees and straightforwardly conveys strengths as well as weaknesses in their characters. Morgan does not ignore or downplay the greed and violence associated with the historical events he confronts in the book, and he leaves no doubt that his own sympathies are understatedly yet firmly directed toward the victims of the westward expansion movement—the Native Americans.

In creating an overarching yet trustworthy nonfiction narrative of his own region's role in the founding of the American nation, Morgan exhibits humility and restraint—he makes no claims that *Lions of the West* is a revisionist historical study of the frontier of Appalachia and the "Old Southwest." Eschewing the self-consciousness and stylistic trickery endemic to much contemporary nonfiction, Morgan crafts a direct and linear portrayal of a complex shared historical experience. Neither romanticizing nor vilifying the characters whose nation-making deeds he recounts, Morgan avoids the pseudo-mythologizing often associated with popular history books and instead unapologetically assesses the public actions of various historical personages, with psychologically credible analyses of their private motivations.

Interestingly, while *Boone* was lauded within literary as well as history communities, *Lions of the West* primarily garnered critical reactions from historians. Accordingly, Morgan's recent nonfiction books, while engagingly written, should be appraised first and foremost as authoritative and

insightful works of history. Like the pioneers he writes about, who crossed over the mountains to find new territories in which to settle without losing their Appalachian identities, Morgan, in these two nonfiction books, has ventured into and mastered a new and difficult terrain—the genre of formal history—without surrendering the distinctive literary qualities that have long empowered his poetry and his fiction.

### Reference

Morgan, Robert. 2003. *Brave enemies*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

*Ted Olson* is a past editor of the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. He is the author of several books, including *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi), *Breathing in darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications), and *Revelations: Poems* (Celtic Cat Publishing). He teaches Appalachian studies at East Tennessee State University.

### Fiction

#### *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*

Ann Pancake

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015; 256 pp.

The pure anguish of love lost and homes sacrificed falls from the pages of *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*, Ann Pancake's collection of eleven short stories and novellas. It's a beautiful anguish, though, and the reader is compelled to turn every page and live each life. Raised in Romney, West Virginia, Pancake continues to create stories that reflect her devotion to Appalachia and her state's storytelling traditions.

While mountaintop removal, the topic of Pancake's 2007 novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, is not left out of the collection, Pancake expands the story of West Virginia by showing us the seemingly simple lives led by West Virginians challenged by treacherous outside forces. In the first story, "In Such Light," Pancake whisks the reader along the Ohio River Valley on the back of a motorcycle. We see life through the blurred vision of a wayward girl, clinging tightly to the only love she has ever known, as she attempts to navigate a life of addiction and loss. Pancake's second story, "Mouseskull," takes an abrupt and welcome turn to the rural life of a child wrestling with the lingering mystery around her grandfather's death and the quiet natural decay of the earth and homestead around her contradicting, yet supporting, a child's concern and obsession with loss.

This obsession continues in "Arsonists," a terrifying glimpse into the dark world of land and mind control that accompanies Big Coal throughout West Virginia. Equally heartbreaking, Pancake follows with "Dog Song," once again bearing witness to the destruction of life and love, as

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