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Book Review: Bruce E. Stewart. Blood on the Hills: A History of Violence in Appalachia

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Blood on the Hills: A History of Violence in Appalachia. Edited by Bruce E. Stewart (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012. Pp. 412. Illustrations, index. Cloth. \$55.00.)

From *Guy Rivers*, William Gilmore Simms's 1834 novel, to the FX television series *Justified*, Appalachia has been portrayed as a region uniquely prone to violence and disorder. Over the years, various explanations have been proffered—most of them trite and lazy nods to genetic factors or cultural determinism. *Blood on the Hills* brings together thirteen essays by established scholars and talented young historians alike, almost all of which do an excellent job of at once depicting specific violent episodes and exposing the superficiality of outmoded explanations.

As is to be expected in collections of this sort, not all the contributions are outstanding. Katherine Ledford's examination of eyewitness accounts of Appalachian life quickly goes off the rails by rejecting the veracity of eight separate travelers without producing a shred of evidence that such "reports" (scare quotes hers) are suspect. Likewise, T.R.C. Hutton's "Assassins and Feudists" is a rambling attempt to link the 1900 William Goebel assassination to violence in eastern Kentucky, all in order to argue what anyone with a passing knowledge of the event already knows—that politics played a crucial role in Appalachian violence.

Yet these two are the exceptions in an otherwise remarkable collection of essays. Among the highlights is Mary Ella Engel's extraordinarily well-rendered account of an 1879 murder of a Mormon missionary in northern Georgia that places the killing within the context not of religious prejudice per se but of the Mormons' disruption of Appalachian kinship networks. Likewise, Durwood Dunn renders a superb and harrowing account of an eastern Tennessee minister run out of his pulpit for protesting the torture of two slaves at the hands of a couple of "respectable" elites.

The essays range back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time before the stereotypes of a violent Appalachia became commonplace. Kevin Barksdale offers a concise and informative account of the short-lived State of Franklin and the "near-perpetual violence" (46) of its four-year pseudo-existence. Kathryn Shively Meier examines Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley in the late eighteenth century and finds the violence there to be a result of both political quarrels and interracial conflict born of land encroachment. In southern Appalachia, unruly and violent young Cherokee warriors, Tyler Boulware argues, were a chronic problem for tribal leaders, but one they skillfully used as a lever in negotiations with European-Americans. John Inscoc examines lawlessness in the early nineteenth century boomtowns of the north Georgia goldfields by analyzing one of the very first popular depictions of

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Appalachian violence, Simms's *Guy Rivers*.

Bruce Stewart charts the creation of the moonshiner myth in late nineteenth century periodicals, revealing that the stereotype was peddled in the service of rationalizing Victorian era efforts to forcibly drag uncouth mountaineers into the modern world—an effort that necessarily entailed the acceptance of an exploitative industrial order. Richard Starnes vividly depicts the 1933 murder of Thomas Price, a wealthy and well-connected railroad man, and the subsequent efforts of mountain people themselves to counter the violent stereotype of their region. Paul Rakes and Kenneth Bailey, meanwhile, skillfully catalog the extraordinary violence of West Virginian coal towns. The harrowing racial dimensions of mountain violence are dissected by separate and outstanding essays by Rand Dotson—who renders an account of the Roanoke, Virginia riot of 1893—and Kevin Young, who examines racial lynching of Broadus Mitchell in western North Carolina in the 1920s.

So what, in the aggregate, are we to make of these essays? Bruce Stewart, in his introduction to the collection, argues that they “debunk the myth of violent Appalachia” (18)—by which the reader must assume he means a *uniquely* violent Appalachia, for if the collection does anything, it quite clearly demonstrates that violence was fairly endemic to mountain life: a North Georgian gang shoots a Mormon missionary two dozen times in the head and neck; a respected member of an east Tennessee community whips an elderly slave 300 times with a carpenter’s handsaw; dozens upon dozens of mountaineers are shot in cold blood, many without any discernable reason.

But were such levels of violence atypical of America as a whole? Here, this admirable collection falls short, for the case that “violence in Appalachia was not exceptional” (6) remains not so much unproven, but essentially unargued; little context or comparative evidence is presented that would enable such a claim to be evaluated.

In large part, the problem is one of historiographical context—or, more accurately, the lack of one. Seldom mentioned in the collection are the important studies of Richard Maxwell Brown, Richard Hofstadter, Richard Slotkin, David Courtwright, Randolph Roth, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, all of which argue that, although American levels of violence were—and are—exceptionally high, the rate of violence has

not been uniform through space or time.¹ Two crucial determinants identified by these scholars are concentrations of young, single men and the government's ability to exert and extend its authority. The first explanation, best elaborated by Courtwright, receives support from Paul Rakes and Kenneth Bailey, who find far greater levels of violence in the coal camps of West Virginia—known for their “abundance of liquor and testosterone” (319)—than elsewhere in the state. But given that the gender imbalance of the West Virginia coal towns was not typical of Appalachia as a whole, a second, Weberian explanation may be more appropriate: the crucial variable in the ebb and flow of violence in America's history has hinged upon the ability of the nation-state to secure a “monopoly on violence”—and thereby restrict or punish non-sanctioned violence. Richard Hofstadter gave voice to such a position decades ago:

The story of our diminished violence . . . has been in good part the story of the submergence and defeat of arbitrary, bigoted, self-satisfied local forces by the advancing cosmopolitan sentiment of a larger, somewhat more neutrally minded state, or, better, national public. It has been marked by the replacement of small-town vigilantes by state authorities or national troops . . . the supremacy of national laws and standards over state and municipal laws and practices.²

Similarly, Randolph Roth has recently maintained that the two most important factors influencing American murder rates are levels of trust in government and a belief in the honesty of elected officials. As he elaborates, “if no government can establish uncontested authority and impose law and order, if political elites are deeply divided and there is no continuity of power or orderly succession, men can . . . take up arms on behalf of particular political factions or racial groups and kill without

1 Richard M. Brown's works include *The South Carolina Regulators: The Story of the First American Vigilante Movement* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press), 1963; *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); and *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Richard Hofstadter views are summarized in his introduction to Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970). Richard Slotkin has produced a remarkably influential trilogy of works on the mythology of American violence: *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992). David Courtwright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

2 Hofstadter, *American Vipolence*, 28.

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restraint.”³ This, it seems, could serve as a fairly accurate summary of the book at hand.

Given the sheer physical challenge presented by the Appalachian mountain range, one doesn’t have to be Fernand Braudel to wonder how this geographic reality both impeded the ability of state and federal authorities to assert their power in the region and gave marauders opportunity to prey on the civilian populations—people who in turn were forced to defend themselves by violent means.

None of this should be read as an argument against Stewart’s contention that Appalachia was—and is—“a society very much American,” (6) or a dissent from the laudable and necessary desire of the essayists to correct the still-lingering notion that the region is a land inhabited by a not-quite-American “Other.” Yet, like recent trends in the writing of Southern history, the effort to minimize the differences between nation and section may obscure as much as it clarifies. What does it really tell us to assert: Appalachia is violent; America is violent; therefore Appalachia is just America writ small? Indeed, if regional peculiarities are myths, why is there a distinct field to begin with? At which point do we strip place of any explanatory power?

Such questions are not meant to impugn the overall quality of the essays—on the contrary, their excellence is a testament to the wealth of young talent in the field, as well as the continuing relevance of more established scholars. But although the canvases are skillfully executed, perhaps we should reconsider the manner in which they are framed.

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3 Roth, *American Homicide*, 17, 28-29.