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Book Review: Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945

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Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008. ISBN: 9780813125237 (hardcover: alk. paper) 0813125235 (hardcover: alk. paper) 326 p. \$29.95

In *Uneven Ground*, Professor Ronald Eller undertakes the ambitious task of exploring the “politics of development” in the mountains of the Appalachian states from World War II to the present day. The author attempts to address the complex interplay of diverse factors that shaped post-war developments in the region. Eller also discusses regional development in the context of “the idea of progress as it has evolved in modern America itself.” He contends that during the course of events covered by this history, Appalachia ceased to be a region apart: “growth had indeed come to the mountains, with its uneven benefits and hidden inequalities. ... It was America, and the region’s uncertain destiny stood as a warning to the rest of the nation.”

The very broad scope of *Uneven Ground* makes it a useful overview of the history of Appalachia. It is also a study of the perils and pitfalls of regional approaches to problem solving, the unpredictable results of the economic growth policies, and the importance of grassroots efforts. This work brings together valuable information on a number of national, regional, state, business, charitable, and other programs which have endeavored, with mixed results, to solve problems of material poverty and educational deficiencies in Appalachia. The author does mention the Appalachian Volunteers, the subject of Thomas Kiffmeyer’s recent *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), but as only one of many players in the field.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of this book is Eller’s treatment of the impact of the coal industry on regional development, and the related issues of environmental devastation and ravages of black lung disease. In this vein, *Uneven Ground* carries forward some of Eller’s earlier work which focused on regional industrialization and labor, such as his 1982 publication from the University of Tennessee, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Readers may also find *Uneven Ground* reminiscent of C. Vann Woodward’s treatment of earlier colonialist developments in the southern states, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*.

A major thread throughout *Uneven Ground* is the role played by “the idea of Appalachia,” or, more accurately, contradictory ideas concerning Appalachia held by different players. According to Eller, the region and its people have been viewed either as remnants of a simpler frontier life, to be treasured and preserved intact, or as isolated and backward, culturally and materially deprived, in need of mainstreaming and uplift through education and industrialization. He notes that both ideas are heavily value-laden, and merit thoughtful scrutiny.

Eller and his family come from Appalachia; he writes from the perspective of a participant observer as well as an historian. This may constitute both a strength and weakness in this work. The author has a lifetime of first-hand experiences and family traditions to aid his understanding of the topics he documents. His evident personal identification with, and championing of, the local people does raise concerns of a possible lack of objectivity regarding certain issues.

It is unfortunate that Eller did not include any maps of the Appalachian region, to assist the reader unfamiliar with the geographic and political divisions under discussion. There are notable photographs that contribute to Eller’s story, showing the literally and figuratively uneven ground of Appalachia, e.g., images of lovely, steep mountains juxtaposed with areas devastated by strip mining; the exhausted dignity of mine workers laboring under dangerous conditions, for inadequate wages, to provide coal to the nation; a local widow resisting big coal companies’ destructive practices being hauled off to jail by law enforcement; and billboards touting modern conveniences.

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