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Book Review - Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia

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Off the SHELF

Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia by Helen M. Lewis; edited by Patricia D. Beaver and Judith Jennings with an introduction by Stephen L. Fisher (University Press of Kentucky, 2012: ISBN 978-0-8131-3437-6, \$25.00)

Georgia native Helen M. Lewis speaks through her writings, interviews, and speeches for this inspiring reader on Appalachian activism. The author and editors share common threads throughout their life's work and mission. Editor Patricia D. Beaver serves as director of the Center for Appalachian Studies and is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Appalachian State University. Editor Judith Jennings recently retired as the executive director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women and in 2013 was listed as a significant nonprofit arts leader by the Western States Art Federation. Stephen L. Fisher, also a friend and fellow activist, wrote the introduction, which clarifies for the reader the book's structure and arrangement of material.

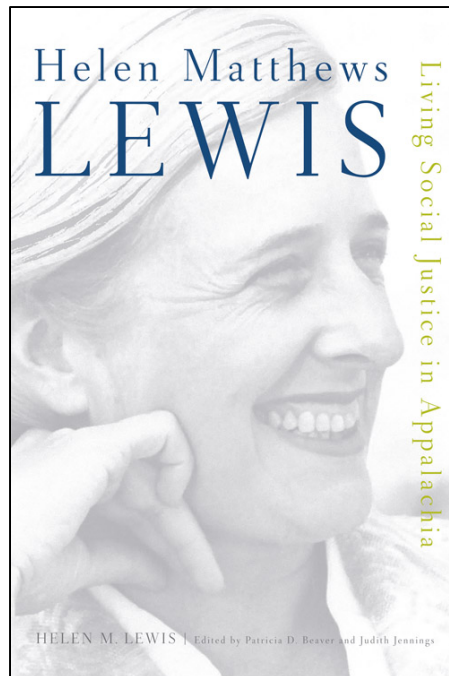
Like a patchwork quilt, this book pieces together Ms. Lewis's interviews, speeches, and publications drawn from a variety of sources. The result produces a work rather unexpected, not quite the typical biographical narrative smoothly rolling from birth going forward. Rather, the text introduces, contextualizes, and reflects her life's work via contributions from scholars and contemporaries alongside the words of Ms. Lewis. The book also delves into

the evolution of the Appalachian Studies movement in which she helped to lead and develop from its infancy. Her work reads as a story of empowerment, conceptualization, and study of Appalachian issues rather than as a straightforward biography of Helen M. Lewis.

The reader discovers that many social issues in Appalachia share international commonalities with colonized areas where extractive industries

strip away natural resources, enriching companies based far away; and when the resources are depleted, they leave behind economically devastated communities and wasteland. The book also debunks the common misconceptions about the region's residents while pointing out strengths of Appalachian people. Helen Lewis' many accomplishments include contributions in the development of ground breaking approaches to education using forward thinking curriculum. She fostered the teaching of participatory research with students using what they

already knew to study issues in their home communities. The results armed students with an essential understanding of the long-term effects that outside development can impose on their community, health, and livelihood, which encouraged the promotion of social change from within the community. She left academia and facilitated the creation of organizations that teach community and religious leaders ways to strengthen their communities. Additionally, she recognized and wrote about the positive roles Appalachian



women historically played in strengthening and rebuilding their communities.

Reading Helen M. Lewis's story is valuable for its historical significance and contribution to the Appalachian studies field and is recommended for both public and academic libraries. While a regional focus predominates in the writing, ties to international issues are investigated,

established, and discussed. Libraries with collections of gender studies, political science activism, social work, sociology, or southern biographies would benefit from the addition of this title.

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