



PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY LEATH MILLS

“WHAT I FEEL I WAS PUT ON THE PLANET TO DO:”

An Interview with Wayne Caldwell

by Jerry Leath Mills

Wayne Caldwell graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1969 and proceeded rapidly through MA (Appalachian State) and PhD (Duke) degrees, specializing in English literature of the Renaissance and seventeenth century. After three years of college teaching in North Carolina and New York, he left academia, and he and his wife Mary returned to their native Asheville to join the furniture business of Mary's family. Although Caldwell had long felt the urge to write fiction, for years his literary efforts extended only to a few scholarly pieces and a history of his local church. But around 1998 he began in earnest, producing two prize-winning short stories that soon grew into a very large manuscript and won for him a two-book contract with the prestigious publishing firm of Random House.

The first volume to appear was *Cataloochee* (2007), a panoramic novel following four generations of North Carolina mountain people in the Cataloochee Valley from late in the Civil War to 1928, the beginning of their displacement by Federal authorities during absorption of their properties into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. As the prospect of removal looms in the second half of the story, this displacement combines with numerous personal, domestic, and social conflicts in ways that critics have likened to the art of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. *Requiem by Fire*, published in 2010, commences in 1928, one day after the *Cataloochee* narrative comes to a close. A sequel in the sense that it continues the earlier story, *Requiem by Fire* nonetheless stands as a self-contained entity with all necessary knowledge of previous events provided within its frame. The focus narrows somewhat from that of its predecessor, to the moving depiction of two principal characters – one old, one young – in their responses to the pressures of removal and loss.

The following interview with Wayne Caldwell was conducted at the office of Ambiance Interiors in Asheville on 9 July 2009.

Since his retirement as Professor of English at UNC-Chapel Hill, **JERRY LEATH MILLS** has settled in Washington, NC. Among his numerous publications is his creative nonfiction essay “Ruins of Time,” published in *NCLR* 17 (2008).