



# “You sang me a song, and I heard”:

The Song Behind a Wellman Legend *by Mark Ogilvie*



Manly Wade Wellman was so attuned to the heartbeat of Appalachian folklore that one unfamiliar with his biography would not guess from his North Carolina-set fiction that he was not a native of this state, which he called home for forty years (from 1946 until his death in 1986). Indeed, Wellman himself might be considered a folk hero much like “John,” the Appalachian balladeer he invented.<sup>1</sup> Like John the Balladeer, Wellman spent a considerable time exploring the North Carolina mountains and, through his writing, defending the honor of the mountain people. Wellman portrayed superstition and poverty in his Carolina-based fiction, but never in a way that condescended to the mountain folk of western North Carolina. He consistently used the adventures of John the Balladeer to remind his readers of the homespun wisdom, the self-reliance, and the deep religious faith that characterize the people of the southern Appalachians. Wellman was an observant pupil of these people and their ways.<sup>2</sup> Through his enormous appeal as a writer, Wellman popularized Appalachian folk tales and music, principally through his tales about John the Balladeer. Wellman’s fiction has often been categorized as mystery and science fiction, but to describe these works as fantasy stories emanating from southern Appalachian ballads and folk tales would be more accurate.

My first glimpse into Wellman’s magical vision of the Carolina mountains came when I was a child. Nestled within Alfred Hitchcock’s *Monster Museum* anthology (Random House, 1965) was a Wellman short story entitled “The Desrick on Yandro,” an eerie tale of greed and romance

<sup>1</sup> For more on Manly Wade Wellman, see Daniel Ross’s Wellman website at <http://www.manlywadewellman.com>, which includes an article on Wellman’s recurrent character John the Balladeer. That article’s author, Paul F. Olson, also compares Wellman to his character.

<sup>2</sup> The extent of Wellman’s knowledge of some locales was sufficient for him to write a history of Madison County, North Carolina: *The Kingdom of Madison: A Southern Mountain Fastness and Its People* (University of North Carolina Press, 1973).