

AN INTERVIEW
BY ZACKARY VERNON

WRITING THE GREAT WAR

RON RASH and
TERRY ROBERTS

Discuss World War I,
the North Carolina
German Internment Camp,
and the Historical Novel



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK HASKETT



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGUERITE HUGGINS

In May of 1917, the inhabitants of the sleepy resort town of Hot Springs, North Carolina, were shocked and dismayed to learn that the local Mountain Park Hotel was being converted into an internment camp for Germans. Due to the United States entering World War I in April of 1917, business at this upscale resort had stymied, and the hotel's owner, James Edwin Rumbough, was all too happy to receive the 1,500 dollars per month that the government offered him to lease the Mountain Park Hotel. Throughout the next year, approximately 2,300 German nationals came to reside on the grounds of this tucked-away hotel in the mountains of Western North Carolina. In the vast majority of cases, the internees were not military combatants; rather, most were German merchant marines and employees on passenger ships that happened to be in American harbors in 1917. Many of the internees even worked on premier cruise ships, such as the *Das Vaterland*, which was then the world's largest and most luxurious ocean liner. In fact, many

of the internees were highly educated and well-trained professionals, such as the ship's high-ranking officers and the members of a world-class orchestra. The internment camp at Hot Springs provided a stage on which disparate social groups and classes collided, bringing about what was, at the time, an unprecedented cultural exchange between Europeans and Southern Appalachians.¹

In an almost unbelievable coincidence, this little-known chapter of North Carolina history became the backdrop for two novels published in 2012: Ron Rash's *The Cove* and Terry Roberts's *A Short Time to Stay Here*.² Roberts's novel conveys the story of Stephen Robbins, the manager of the Mountain Park Hotel, who is charged with overseeing the Germans after they are interned there. In addition to the Germans, in Roberts's novel the Mountain Park Hotel is invaded by Anna Ulmann, a spirited photographer from New York who comes to Hot Springs to document both the internees and the Appalachian natives. Throughout the narrative, the burden falls on Stephen to navigate the cultural chasm that is widening between the US and Germany, and between Southern Appalachia and the rest of America. Rash's novel deals less directly with the Hot Springs internment camp. Instead, his narrative focuses on Walter, a German who escapes the camp and takes refuge with Laurel Shelton and her brother Hank in a secluded mountain cove. At first, Walter hides his German identity by pretending to be mute. When Laurel eventually discovers the truth, she does not turn him in to the authorities because she and Walter have

ZACKARY VERNON received his PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill in 2014. His dissertation is entitled "Haunted by Waters: The Hydropolitics of American Literature and Film, 1960–1980." In 2014–15, he will be a Visiting Assistant Professor of American literature and film at Merrimack College in Boston. See also his essay on Allan Gurganus in the Flashbacks section of this issue.

¹ For more information on the German internment camp, see Jacqueline Burgin Painter and Jonathan William Horstman, *The German Invasion of Western North Carolina: A Pictorial History* (Asheville, NC: Biltmore, 1992) 204–205.

² Ron Rash, *The Cove* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012); Terry Roberts, *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Banner Elk, NC: Ingalls Publishing, 2012). Quotations from these novels will be cited parenthetically.