

## THEY HAVE BEEN AT SOMETHING, SOME CARRION, A DEER, OR SUCH

a review by  
Jimmy Dean Smith

Vicki Lane. *And the Crows Took Their Eyes*. Regal House Publishing, 2020.

**JIMMY DEAN SMITH** teaches in the English Department at Union College in Barbourville, KY. He has written about Ron Rash in *NCLR* 2011 and Tony Earley in *NCLR* 2020.

Formerly of Florida, where she taught in private schools, **VICKI LANE** has lived and farmed with her husband in Madison County, NC, since 1975. *And the Crows Took Their Eyes* was a finalist for the 2021 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award.

The library of Shelton Laurel literature keeps growing. With such precursors as Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain*, 1997), Ron Rash (poems dating from the late '90s and the novel, *The World Made Straight*, 2006),<sup>1</sup> Sharyn McCrumb (*Ghost Riders*, 2003), Sean O'Leary (*Beneath Shelton Laurel*, 2005), and Terry Roberts (*That Bright Land*, 2016), Vicki Lane draws inspiration from a seemingly inexhaustible source. *And the Crows Took Their Eyes* is historical fiction that does what history cannot do on its own: rescue survivors of an Appalachian tragedy from the din of the past. Of note is the novel's focus on the suffering – and courage – of the women of Shelton Laurel. Like her predecessors, Lane expresses the snow-pelted horror of the murders themselves but goes on, in greater detail than others, to describe the events leading up to and following the massacre, defining the bedrock divisions in Madison County not just as Confederate/Unionist but also as urban/rural, a theme with much pertinence today. In ways, then, *And the Crows Took Their Eyes* offers a more comprehensive historical context than other Shelton Laurel writing while also giving characters the "inner emotional life" (293) history leaves out.

Vicki Lane is best known for her six Elizabeth Goodweather mysteries. Like Lane, Elizabeth Goodweather is a transplant to Madison County and often finds her city ways tested, and improved, by her occasionally homicidal neighbors. Since

2007, Lane has operated a [blog](#) where she posts photographs of flowers and chickens and talks honestly about her writing. On the site, she emphasizes that she is a popular novelist and not a literary writer, a claim she might consider revisiting on the evidence of *And the Crows Took Their Eyes*. In generous detail, Lane discusses her anthropological reasons for using eye dialect in her Appalachian mysteries, even though she notes being aware of reasons not to, including that the practice is frowned upon in literary circles. From that literary point of view, her technique has improved since the first page of *Signs in the Blood* (2005). There is nary a "cain't" in *And the Crows Took Their Eyes*, and "kin" always means "relatives," not "the opposite of cain't."

Lane posts about her fiction projects, including her Shelton Laurel novel, sympathetically engaging with commenters, including descendants of characters in *And the Crows Took Their Eyes*. Max Hunt's *Mountain Xpress* article is not only a good primer on the massacre but its comments are also an indication of how contentious the event still is.<sup>2</sup> Lane is both brave and polite to open her own blog to the possibility of hostilities still simmering 160 years after the event.

The Shelton Laurel Massacre is a more complicated affair than its commemorative roadside marker ("Thirteen men and boys, suspected of Unionism, were killed by Confederate soldiers in early 1863. Graves 8

mi. E.") makes it seem. One way Lane expresses that complexity is through the polyphony of five narrators. Even Colonel James Keith of the 64<sup>th</sup> North Carolina, a villain in several literary works, gets a fair deal from Lane: she lets him make his case and, though he betrays personal flaws in his narration, one does not feel that he is a defendant taking the stand and flat out lying. Keith and Polly Allen, wife of another despised Confederate officer, represent Marshall in this story. They own the more conventional narrative voices, with Lane partly basing their language on primary documents. They sound like characters in historical fiction, a technique that does not always pay off, especially when Keith, secretly in love with Polly, engages in romantic treacle: "Her smile was still sweet and the violet shadows beneath her eyes merely enhanced her fragile beauty" (201). Still, Polly's habitual recourse to cliché when reporting on Juliann, the enslaved woman who runs her household, is chilling in its bourgeois niceness: Juliann "came to us" (26), says Polly, euphemisti-



PHOTOGRAPH BY VICKI LANE

ABOVE BOTTOM North Carolina historical marker located on NC 208 at NC 212, west of Shelton Laurel

cally, and she is "a treasure, if ever there was one" (24) – the fulsome praise of the genteel enslaver. And Polly's presence reminds us that the massacre itself, awful as that singular event was, was only the climax of a series of atrocities, including the torture and eventual deaths of Polly's children (and, the novel suggests, the rape of Polly) by backcountry, perhaps Laurelite, marauders.

The more interesting narrators are Simeon Ramsey, Judith Shelton, and Marthy White. The one narrator not based in history, Simeon first appears as



COURTESY OF THE JAMES O. HALL COLLECTION, SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN ARCHIVES, MARSH HILL UNIVERSITY

rigorous and non-partisan, with a Quaker sweetheart in Tennessee. He declares a separate peace – "What I say is let the Unionists and the Secesh fight it out amongst themselves" (9) – but cannot escape the gravitational pull of American hatred. His eventual conscription into the North Carolina 64<sup>th</sup> leads him both to the most decent act in the entire novel but also to the most atrocious and to the story's tragic denouement.

ABOVE CENTER Dr. James A. Keith, circa 1880 (courtesy of his granddaughter, Mrs. James F. Arnold, El Paso, TX)



COURTESY OF THE JAMES O. HALL COLLECTION, SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN ARCHIVES, MARSH HILL UNIVERSITY

Excepting David Shelton, the boy who died at the massacre, Judith Shelton may be the best known of the Laurel's historical personages. "Aunt Judy" is perhaps this novel's hero. Like other women of the Laurel, she is tortured but still silent when Confederate troops demand information. After the massacre, she organizes the mass burial of family and friends. After the war, she increasingly assumes her role as matriarch. Expanding on the historical record, Lane takes Judith Shelton's fecundity and lack of a husband and creates something new in Appalachian literature: an unashamedly horny granny-woman. And Lane turns little more than a historical reference to an "idiot girl" in the Laurel into Marthy White, the nonverbal teen whose love story is both unsurprising (any reader of Shelton Laurel literature should be able to guess who her sweetheart is) and immensely moving. At the same time, the voiceless Marthy reminds us how often history silences some of its witnesses, even when it is they who bear so much of its terrible weight. ■

ABOVE TOP Lawrence Marion Allen and his wife, Mary Margaret Peek Allen, reproduced from a glass negative made in the late 1850s (courtesy of Mrs. Helen Allen, Huntington Beach, CA)

<sup>1</sup> Read Ron Rash's essay about his novel *The World Made Straight* in *NCLR* 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Max Hunt "Blood in the Valley: The Shelton Laurel Massacre's Haunting Legacy," *Mountain Xpress* 28 Jan 2016; [web](#).