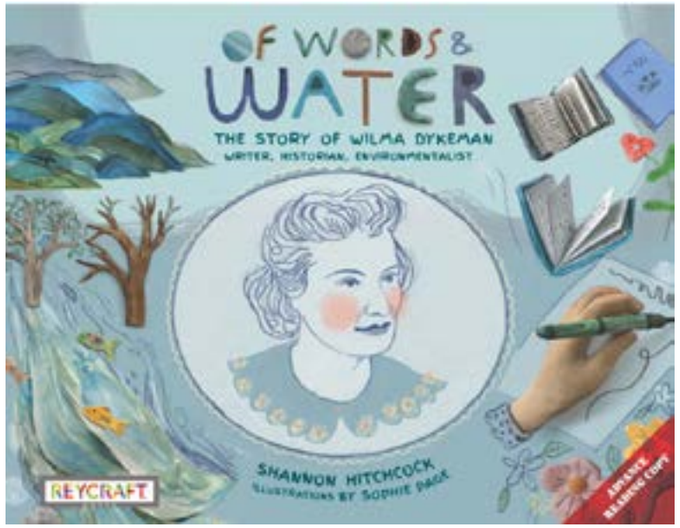
UNEARTHING THE UNSUNG HERO

a review by Naisa Beaumont

Shannon Hitchcock. ***Of Words & Water: The Story of Wilma Dykeman – Writer, Historian, Environmentalist.*** Reycraft Books, 2024.



Many of us have heard the names Rachel Carson or John Muir, Americans who were at the forefront of the twentieth-century environmental movement. Carson's name may conjure images of a woman walking near a stream holding binoculars or peering through a microscope. Muir's name evokes the image of a bristly, silver-bearded man sauntering about the redwood forests. These names are familiar to many of us, and their connection to the American environmental movement is well established and clear, perhaps even to those who may not be the outdoorsy or nature-loving type.

But like any social or political movement, there are those iconic figures who take the center stage, and those who, although just as influential and important, might remain hidden in plain sight or along the sidelines. This is where picture book biographies help fill the gap for young readers and grown-ups alike. I love picture book biographies for this very reason: the best ones introduce us to hidden figures who may have been left out of our traditional education. *Of Words & Water: The Story of Wilma Dykeman – Writer, Historian, Environmentalist* is one of these biographies. Written by Shannon Hitchcock and illustrated by Sophie Page, this lyrical picture book brings the story of North Carolina native Wilma Dykeman to the surface.

Activist, speaker, teacher, and writer, Wilma Dykeman was born and raised near Asheville, NC, in 1920 to a retired dairy farmer and homemaker. She spent her childhood exploring the woods and streams of her family's eleven-acre farm. At eighteen, she studied acting at Northwestern University and was set to work as a faculty member at the Finch School in New York City – quite the accomplishment for a young woman in the 1930s. Then in 1940, Wilma married James R. Stokely, Jr., the son of the president of a successful canned food company, and found herself back home in Appalachia. Over the next two decades, Wilma raised two sons while writing fiction and nonfiction books and articles on the natural environment and civil rights.

In her book, *The French Broad* (1965), Dykeman details the historical significance, geological aspects, and modern-day exploitation of the French Broad River, a two hundred-fifty-million-year-old waterway (the third oldest in the world) spanning 218 miles from Asheville to Knoxville, TN. Long before the term "sustainable development" was coined, Wilma argued that the health of the local economy and people's livelihoods depended on the conservation of the river. Her work brought local industry's degradation of the French Broad to the forefront of public consciousness. She made some of the earliest economic arguments against water pollution, well before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

In *Of Words & Water* Hitchcock tells the story of Wilma's contributions to environmentalism through beautiful lyrical prose that often mimics the gentle yet steady rhythm of water itself. Hitchcock writes of Wilma's "streams of words" that "flow" from her pen, carrying messages as "constant as rivers rolling towards the sea." Evocative descriptions of "black water" and "dying trout" show the tremendous challenge that lay before Wilma and the people of Appalachia. The text is complimented well by Sophie Page's unique mixed media illustrations. Using colorful clay and paper, Page's artistic depiction lends a telluric and earthy quality to the story. The texture of the artwork is so rich and soothing that one can almost smell the aroma of wet earth along a riverbed.

A good picture book biography informs and inspires. A great one acts as a gateway, launching the reader further into a rabbit hole in the person's life and work. I entered this rabbit hole after enjoying *Of Words and Water,* seeking more about Dykeman's pioneering arguments for civil rights, environmental justice, and economic sustainability. Even today, there are those who would have us believe in the false choice between prosperity and conservation. Dykeman acknowledged the "anxious people who [weighed] the expense of cleaning the river" and their own livelihoods, yet dispelled the myth that we have to choose only one or the other.

Librarians and educators looking to bolster their STEAM collections or curriculum will certainly benefit from this book. Teachers can use *Of Words & Water* to discuss responsible decision-making or what it means to be a good citizen. For example, Wilma refused to omit information in *The French Broad* about industrial poison even though her publishers wanted her to. *Of Words & Water* can also help educators draw parallels to and initiate discussions of modern-day pollution sources like data centers. Readers aged seven to twelve interested in nature, history, and women in science will love this book (although I am a firm believer that one is never too old for picture books).

History is made up of countless unsung heroes and heroines. It's up to storytellers and readers alike to unearth them from history's shadows. ■

NAISA BEAUMONT completed her graduate certificate in Children's Book Writing and Illustration through the University of California San Diego Division of Extended Studies. Naisa was the recipient of the 2022 WriteMentor Programme award and the 2023 Highlights Foundation Novel Workshop scholarship. Raised in New York City, she now lives near the Blue Ridge Mountains in northern Virginia with her husband and two daughters. She volunteers for her local residential conservancy non-profit.

SHANNON HITCHCOCK is a children's and young adult author. She grew up in rural North Carolina. Her books have been featured on many state awards lists and have received acclaimed reviews. *Of Words & Water* received the 2024 INDIES Bronze Award for Juvenile Nonfiction, the 2024 National Science Teaching Association Award, and was a 2025 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Awards Honorable Mention. Her recent novel is *Wild Mountain Ivy* (Lerner Publishing Group, 2026).

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE **Illustrations from the book by Sophie Page; courtesy of Reycraft Books**