

“WHAT THE MOUNTAINS AND FORESTS DID FOR ME”: A FINE COLLECTION OF KEPHART’S WORDS

a review by Rebecca Godwin

George Frizzell and Mae Miller Claxton, Editors. *Horace Kephart: Writings*. University of Tennessee Press, 2020.

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“Outside the tent on the Little Fork / of the Sugar Fork of Hazel Creek / a man is writing.”* So begins Robert Morgan’s poem “Horace Kephart,” depicting the outdoorsman who helped to shape America’s perceptions about Southern Appalachia in the early twentieth century. In *Horace Kephart: Writings*, George Frizzell and Mae Miller Claxton allow us a deeper dive into the journey of this nature aficionado who argued for the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as the Appalachian Trail. Including photographs, notes, bibliography, appendices, index, and scholarly introductions to each of nine sections, this impressive compilation covers Kephart’s life prior to his move to Dillsboro, NC, in 1904, as well as afterwards. The book makes clear that Kephart’s need for the natural world did not preclude his active engagement with public life, right up until his 1931 death in an automobile accident in Bryson City, where he had settled. Drawing especially on Hunter Library’s Special Collections at Western Carolina University, Frizzell and Claxton give us an array of articles, letters, stories, brochures, unpublished manuscripts, and journal entries, arranged thematically, to illustrate Kephart’s range and influence beyond his best known books (both still in print), *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913) and *Camping and Woodcraft: A*

Handbook for Vacation Campers and for Travelers in the Wilderness (1916). *Horace Kephart: Writings* provides essential Appalachian and American history, with an added bonus of highlighting an environmental consciousness that still needs nurturing today.

After a general introduction, the book offers a lengthy biographical section exploring Kephart’s education, his work as a librarian at Cornell and Yale universities before becoming head of the St. Louis Mercantile Library, his marriage, and the breakdown that prompted his move to the North Carolina mountains for recovery. A splendid essay by George Ellison and Janet McCue, joint composers of a 2019 Kephart biography, sets the stage for Kephart’s early writing that follows. Pieces on librarianship, on camping and guns, and on Kephart’s mental crisis join a speech delivered to the Pennsylvania Society of St. Louis in 1901. This speech highlights settlement patterns that led Germans and Scotch-Irish southwestward from Pennsylvania to Carolina, and Kephart reveals his first-rate knowledge of history and ability to tell it in an engaging narrative style.

We also read a 1904 St. Louis newspaper report of Kephart’s hospitalization that reprints a letter he wrote analyzing his own worsening health. In an autobiographical essay published in a 1922 *North Carolina*

Library Bulletin, Kephart says that a breakdown forced him to “abandon professional work and city life,” even as he continued publication in journals such as *All Outdoors* and *Asheville Citizen*, where he shared in 1925, upon joining the Prison Reform Association, his objections to the death penalty (64–65). A library colleague’s personal remembrance and sketch of Kephart’s life, praising his “remarkable mind” and leadership at the St. Louis Mercantile Library, is reprinted from a 1959 *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* (83). Such diverse writings build our sense of Kephart’s character and preview the kinds of texts comprising the remainder of the book. The next section, “Family and Friends,” adds to the biography, with Kephart’s letters to family members proving his continued relationship with them and their various letters indicating respect for his work. Throughout the book, in fact, primary documents create a picture of a family not nearly as broken as outsiders assumed, making us appreciate that primary documents tell a story that interpreters of others’ lives often miss.

The remaining seven sections represent Kephart’s writings on subjects about which he felt passionate: camping and woodcraft, guns, Southern Appalachian culture, the Cherokee people, scouting, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park



COURTESY OF HUNTER LIBRARY, WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

and Appalachian Trail, with one hundred pages devoted to his fiction, mostly stories published in small magazines. His articles in *Forest and Stream*, *Outing*, *All Outdoors*, *Vacation Manual*, *Arms and the Man*, and *American Rifleman*, among other publications, illustrate his style, “a combination of narrative with information,” as Claxton explains, and prove his prominence in early twentieth-century magazine writing (146). A fine cook himself, Kephart gave exact details for camp cooking. He publicized what was on the market to ease outdoors adventurers’ sojourns while giving practical advice about making do. He listed foods’ calories and nutritional value, explaining what the body needs during mountain hiking, of course gave instructions about choosing and erecting tents as well as

keeping items safe from nosy critters. Convincing people they could survive in the great outdoors, he beseeched them to enjoy its benefits while causing no environmental harm. Concerning guns, Kephart shared his technical expertise. In fact, Jim Canada, in his introduction to this section, calls Kephart “arguably the country’s leading expert on ballistics” at the time, a stature he achieved through research skills he developed as a librarian (250).

Writings in other sections continue to show Kephart’s contributions to his adopted region and the country as a whole. His brochures for traveling in the Smokies, published by the Bryson City Drug Store, illustrate that he endorsed tourism for the national park, which one of his articles terms “the last stand of primeval American forest,” and

* Robert Morgan, “Horace Kephart,” *The Edge of the Orchard Country* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987) 3.

GEORGE FRIZZELL was the university archivist at Western Carolina University for almost thirty years. He is a recognized expert in Cherokee studies and Appalachian history who has worked with Kephart materials for almost forty years.

MAE MILLER CLAXTON is an English professor at Western Carolina University. She is coeditor of *Conversations with Ron Rash* (University of Mississippi Press, 2017), editor of *Conversations with Dorothy Allison* (University of Mississippi Press, 2012), and contributing editor to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, sixth edition (Cengage, 2009). Read her essay on Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle in *NCLR 2023*. Other articles of hers have appeared in *Southern Quarterly*, *South Atlantic Review*, and *Mississippi Quarterly*.

ABOVE Horace Kephart at his camp

that he believed “the nation is summoned by a solemn duty to preserve” this forest, especially from the timber industry (609). In a 1930 *New York Times* article, Kephart explains what people settled in the area, how isolation formed their character, and how they embraced elements of industrialism such as new roadways and mandatory education. We read some of his 1920s articles from the Boy Scouts magazine *Boy’s Life* and learn that Kephart served on the National Council of Boy Scouts. His essay series on Cherokees, published in *Outing* in 1919 and republished by his family as *The Cherokees of the Smoky Mountains* (1936), educates readers on the history that led to the native people’s shameful removal, pointing to states’ refusal to abide by federal treaties and tracing political actions and white settlers’ greed. The story he tells resonates with a comment he made to the Pennsylvania Society of St. Louis in 1901: “If we are to get any good out of history, we must face the truth in all its phases, whether it be complimentary to ourselves or not” (41).

The fine introductions to each section of the book follow Kephart’s lead, providing readable, essential context for the documents that follow and occasionally sharing criticisms of his work, such as his incorporation of dialect and moonshining or focus on mountaineers’ isolation, all negative Appalachian stereotypes. Claxton relates Kephart’s writing on camping and woodcraft to the nascent car culture, women’s movement to public spaces, and the outdoors movement that grew as more Americans moved to cities. Her introduction to his fiction describes his debt to nineteenth-century captivity narratives (a collection of which he edited), Southwest humor, Romantic writers such as Emerson, as well as his influence on later writers. All the introductions are invaluable to help readers appreciate the writings that follow.

Horace Kephart: Writings accomplishes a great deal. It publicizes for future scholars all Kephart materials available in Western Carolina University’s Special Collections, much of which Kephart’s family donated,

giving roadmaps to those interested in pursuing environmental or Appalachian studies. It makes available hard-to-find journal articles, speeches, and letters. It introduces us to George Masa, the Japanese photographer based in Asheville who traveled with Kephart, taking pictures used to lobby for the national park. It sets readers into the early twentieth-century world of little magazines that shaped movements and citizens’ relationship to their country. Kephart fulfilled his mission to highlight the relationship between humans and the natural world. Here are lines from an article published in *National Sportsman* in April 1931, the same month he died: “What the mountains and forests did for me they can do for other run-down folks – and then they, too, will be enthusiasts; for one just can’t be stolid or despondent when his lungs are full of mountain air and his blood is coursing free” (629). Frizzell, Claxton, and all the other contributors to this collection also fulfilled their goal, sharing Kephart’s significant environmental and literary legacy. ■

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