

NORTH CAROLINA'S OWN OTTO WOOD: NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL AND TREASURED FOLK HERO

a review by Douglas C.
MacLeod, Jr.

Trevor McKenzie. *Otto Wood, The Bandit: The Freighthopping Thief, Bootlegger, and Convicted Murderer Behind the Appalachian Ballads*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

On the surface, *Otto Wood, The Bandit: The Freighthopping Thief, Bootlegger, and Convicted Murderer behind the Appalachian Ballads* by Trevor McKenzie (with a foreword by David Holt) is a combined academic historical biography and study of bluegrass music during the early nineteenth century. Looking deeper, however, this short but solid account of a cunning and creative convict, who escaped prisons with the greatest of ease, is more so about how Americans lovingly and naively embrace the cult of personality in times of great strife. Similar to that of John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and Charles Nelson “Pretty Boy” Floyd, “The One-Handed Terror of the South’s” life and demise became a “Robin Hood” story of what McKenzie calls a “mid-western Depression-era desperado,” who presently may be deemed as a ne’er-do-well but once was adored by the yearning masses, so much so ballads and a North Carolina-based theatrical production were written in honor of his memory. Thus, McKenzie ultimately is successful in writing a “compelling biography of a criminal who emerged from the modernizing Appalachian South of the early twentieth century” to become a cult hero.

Otto Harrison Wood was born in May 1893 in Wilkes County,

a newly industrialized area of North Carolina, to a family who had firmly planted roots there for over a century. His father, Thomas, died at a young age, leaving the younger Wood and his multiple siblings to the care of his mother, Amelia Ellen, who became a farmer and allegedly the mistress of a local married man. Wood, who suffered from a club foot and severe poverty-related challenges, had difficulty with his instructors in school and was incessantly harassed by his fellow students, but he did manage to learn how to read and write, and he connected with one of his teachers during his brief time in a classroom. He was also an accomplished escape artist and felon at ten years old, getting arrested a series of times for stealing a bicycle, a boat, and petty items, which led him to eventually work on “the Iredell County chain gang for carrying a concealed weapon” (12).

Wood’s first escape attempt was in 1907; however, he was immediately caught and was put back into prison for another month before he was released due to health concerns. Wood’s release would not be permanent; in fact, one could argue he made crime and escape his profession. In his storied and infamous “career,” Wood would end up committing multiple crimes, including the murder of a pawn-

broker named A.W. Kaplan, and being incarcerated in five state penitentiaries, where he would escape eleven times. Now, one could argue Wood was not the best at escaping in that he was always caught and thrown back into the clink; with that said, however, one could also argue Wood thrived on repeatedly exposing the ineptitude of law enforcement. As McKenzie writes, even at an early age, “Wood was already manipulating his image to try to sway the public and the law in his favor” (14). He was young, good-looking, charming. He would publish letters to the public in newspapers and tell tall tales about how he lost his left hand to gain sympathy from the masses. He was articulate, persuasive, and used his physical ailments to his advantage. Wood soaked his fame in. McKenzie writes about how Wood’s distilling and distribution of moonshine is an example of his devious delight: “The opportunities for financial gain, travel, and thrill-seeking offered by this burgeoning underground industry appealed to Otto Wood for obvious reasons” (41).

As the author suggests in his introductory chapters, *Otto Wood: The Bandit* indeed is an incomplete study of this convicted felon, but what makes McKenzie’s work so compelling is how concise and focused



COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

MacLeod’s work is. Historical books about violent criminals sometimes delve too deeply into context and behavioral analysis; in other words, they will over-discuss the time and place when and where the events took place and provide a droll psychological deconstruction of the protagonist/antagonist, because the hapless writers do not have enough concrete data about said protagonist/antagonist. Early on, McKenzie warns readers he does not have much to work with, but he will try his best to stay on course with the limited information he has; and he does so with gusto. McKenzie’s work is not a five-hundred-page tome about the Great Depression,

moonshine production, North Carolina prison history, etc.; nor is it about the in-depth psychology of a chronic, pathological offender who has a sick fascination with taunting the police. This simple and efficient book is a linear timeline of one man who was praised for his misguided ingenuity, who was vilified and eventually killed for his crimes, and who cemented his legacy as a part of North Carolina’s zeitgeist. After his final escape from North Carolina State Prison in July 1930, after travelling state to state and eluding police until December, law enforcement officials – Chief of Police Robert Lee “RL” Rankin and Assistant Chief John W. Kesler – finally found

DOUGLAS C. MACLEOD, JR. is an Associate Professor of composition and communication at SUNY Cobleskill. He has written multiple book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, and book reviews. Recently, he has had essays published in *Childhood and Innocence in American Culture: Heartaches and Nightmares* (Lexington Books, 2023); *Holocaust vs. Popular Culture: Interrogating Incompatibility and Universalization* (Routledge, 2023); and *Film as an Expression of Spirituality: The Arts and Faith Top 100 Films* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023). He lives in Upstate New York.

TREVOR MCKENZIE has worked with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage as an archival and field researcher on American Ginseng traditions. Currently, he is a member of West Virginia Public Broadcasting’s “Inside Appalachia” Folkways Reporting Corps, and the vice president of the North Carolina Folklore Society. McKenzie is involved in the community surrounding the university, working with groups such as Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM), Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, Blue Ridge Hall of Fame, Boone Area Community Radio and the Ashe County Arts Council. He earned a BS in Applied and Public History (2010) and an MA in Appalachian Studies (2012) from Appalachian State University. Additionally, he holds an MLIS from UNC Greensboro. He lives in Boone, NC.

ABOVE Otto Wood’s mugshot, 1913

Wood in Salisbury, NC, the place where Wood would meet his end. After a brief and bloody shootout, the notorious outlaw known as Otto Wood, was shot in the head, killed instantly by a policeman's bullet – and almost immediately became marketable fodder for journalists across the nation: "The earthbound afterlife provided to Wood by these commentators balanced his image on a tightrope strung over the gulf between infamous sociopath and folk hero" (102). It is this mass-media created folk "heroism" that would lead to "The Ballads of Otto Wood," along with a multitude of poems, travelling shows, "literary and musical creations," outdoor dramas, and published stories, all devoted to this "trickster" who solidified his "persona as a tactful, admirable fugitive with a well-timed sense of wit" after years of getting arrested, escaping, and getting arrested again.

By the end of *Otto Wood: The Bandit*, McKenzie efficaciously makes Wood out to be just a fascinating figure in American criminal history who seemed to grab life by the throat and who had decided to not let go. Yes, this compulsive need for excitement and chaos ended in his gory death, and McKenzie is certainly not advocating for anarchy, but at least Wood made the most of his time here; and, he will continuously be remembered because of America's delightful and dare I say dangerous desire to place the Otto Woods of the world on a pedestal for all to see, for all to judge, for all to applaud. ■