

THE IMAGES THAT MADE US

a review by Terry Roberts

Brent Martin. *George Masa's Wild Vision: A Japanese Immigrant Imagines Western North Carolina.* Hub City Press, 2022.

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George Masa (1881–1933) is a profoundly important – but also profoundly enigmatic – figure in the history of Western North Carolina. Research by a number of historians and biographers over the last forty years has taught us just how significant an impact he had on our understanding and appreciation of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. This physically small and unassuming man was a close friend and companion of Horace Kephart's; he was an integral part of the movement to establish the Great Smokies National Park; he was instrumental in the creation of the Appalachian Trail (including establishing the Southern route for the trail); he was a founding member of what became the Carolina Mountain Club. But all of these feats faded in comparison to his accomplishments as a gifted landscape photographer. Indeed, if his friend Kephart is our less well-known counterpart to John Muir, it is not overstating the case to say that Masa is our Ansel Adams. His images of the Southern Appalachians didn't just capture the grandeur and mystery of the mountains; they taught us how to see the mountains in ways that have lasted to this day.

Historians and documentarians rediscovered Masa decades after his death. Wil-



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liam Hart's biographical essay "George Masa: the Best Mountaineer" precipitated important work from documentary filmmaker Paul Bonesteel as well as writers George Ellison, Janet McCue, and Susan Shumaker. The results of their work include Bonesteel's 2002 film, *The Mystery of George Masa*, elements of Ellison and McCue's *Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography* (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2019), as well as a second forthcoming film from Bonesteel, and a forthcoming important, full-length biography from McCue and Bonesteel. We may hope that McCue and

ABOVE George Masa (right)

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that most of Martin's explorations took place during the heart of the COVID pandemic, so that his reflections on Masa and the mountains are folded into his reactions to life during an especially challenging time in his own human history. If there is a flaw in this design, it may be that the reader is left wanting to know more about Masa and his experience of a particular Appalachian landscape and less about Martin's ruminations on life decades later.

The structure of *George Masa's Wild Vision* does lend itself to an exploration of Masa's purposeful interaction with the men and women who, along with him, were striving to bring others into contact with the wilds of the region in such a way that the mountains were both appreciated and preserved. Martin is excellent at suggesting – through Masa's images as well as his own words – Masa's foundational role in the Carolina Mountain Club, the movement to form the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the creation of the Appalachian Trail through North Carolina and Tennessee and into Georgia.

Famously, Masa's partner in these projects was Horace Kephart, up until Kephart's death in an automobile accident in April of 1931. Theirs was both a warm friendship as well as a powerful working partnership. Kephart's words complemented Masa's photographs, and vice versa, such that they were able

Bonesteel will be able to provide more information about the mysterious early decades of Masa's life.*

Brent Martin's *George Masa's Wild Vision* falls squarely in this tradition of strong scholarly work that seeks to resurrect Masa's photographs for a wider audience while simultaneously helping us understand their significance. After an insightful introduction, Martin's first four chapters explore the background of the photos from four

distinct geographical regions: the "Great Smoky Mountains"; the "Highlands Plateau"; the "Mount Mitchell/Black Mountains"; and the "Chimney Rock/Hickory Nut Gorge" areas. Each chapter is an interesting mix of historical research and contemporary reaction to Masa's life and work. In particular, Martin recounts his own travels to revisit these areas in an attempt to see what Masa saw through the eyes of a twenty-first century naturalist. It's also significant

ABOVE A photograph taken by George Masa from Jump Off, a cliff on the northeast side of Mount Kephart, on the Swain County, NC, and Sevier County, TN, border

* William Hart, "George Masa: The Best Mountaineer," in vol. 1 of *May We All Remember Well: A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina*, Ed. Robert S. Brunk (Brunk Auction Services, 1997) 249–253; Bonesteel, *The Mystery of George Masa*, dir. Paul Bonesteel (Bonesteel Films, 2003) and *A Life Reimagined: The George Masa Story* (Bonesteel Films, 2024); George Ellison and Janet McCue, *Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography* (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2019); Janet McCue and Paul Bonesteel, *George Masa: A Life Reimagined* (Smokies Life, 2024).

to appeal to a wide variety of stakeholders who came to support the preservation of the Southern mountains. What is also remarkable is that those same words and photographs have continued to shape how we experience the region almost a century after their deaths. Kephart's books and Masa's images are not just historical artifacts, relevant only to a distant time and place; they speak to this century just as powerfully as they did to the last.

In many ways, Brent Martin is the perfect individual to reflect on Masa's life and work because he is himself a lifelong naturalist whose interests span literature, history, and the visual arts as well as conservation. It is evident throughout this book that he is haunted by Masa in a special way, and that his book represents a personal journey as well as an important contribution to our understanding of Masa.

George Masa's Wild Vision is also significant as one in a series supported by Charles Frazier through his Cold Mountain Fund (along with other businesses and individuals who provided financial support for its publication). Hub City's mission to focus on "extraordinary new and unsung writers from the American South" could easily refer to George Masa as well as Brent Martin. Clearly, this volume required a special effort by the Hub City team because of the number of photographs and documents painstakingly reproduced for our study and appreciation.

Make no mistake, the absolute core of this book is the photographs themselves, painstakingly rescued and placed in the history of Masa's life – often, his own publication of them. If all this volume did was provide the general reader and student with the gallery of

images from Masa's camera, it would be invaluable. The care with which Martin places them in historical and geographical context only adds to their value. As we turn these pages, we are reminded time and again of the physical toil Masa went through in mapping trails, measuring peaks, and climbing to the perfect spot from which to capture an inspired and inspiring image – all while lugging a heavy camera on its awkward tripod.

Ultimately, the reason we remember George Masa and visit his grave (as Martin does at the end of his book) is that he worked so hard to preserve the mountains we love – both in image and in reality – almost as if he somehow knew we would come behind him on the trail. And through his monumental efforts, we would learn to see as he saw and believe as he believed. ■

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