

THE LANDS THAT SHAPE US

a review by Evan Peter Smith

Georgann Eubanks. *Saving the Wild South: The Fight for Native Plants on the Brink of Extinction*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

Bland Simpson. *North Carolina: Land of Water, Land of Sky*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

There are certain books that benefit from being discovered. Of course, there are also different manners of discovery. It would be just as accurate to say you “discovered” a book by reading about it in the *New York Times Book Review* as it is to say you “discovered” a book by finding a dog-eared paperback in the middle of the woods, resting under a pile of leaves and twigs, where it may have fallen out of some hiker’s backpack. But I would argue there is a greater intimacy in the latter scenario.

Two recent books by North Carolina writers feel as though they were born for that second kind of discovery. Both of these volumes – *Saving the Wild South: The Fight for Native Plants on the Brink of Extinction* by Georgann Eubanks and *North Carolina: Land of Water, Land of Sky* by Bland Simpson – are careful meditations on a particular place. With their quiet elegance, these are books that feel destined to be savored and preserved, so that decades from now, a young reader might pluck them off a bookshelf and flip through their pages, discovering yet again what rich literary output this state has to offer.

Georgann Eubanks’s *Saving the Wild South* is the more scientific of the two volumes. Across ten chapters, the book chronicles the unique stories of individual plants that grow in the American South and which are now under threat from habitat loss, climate change, and the whims of ecological fate. From that description, you might expect yet another doom-and-gloom book about man’s continuing destruction

of the planet, and while *Saving the Wild South* does not shy away from these realities, it’s also not a downer by any means. The book’s very title is a proclamation of hope (a more accurate title might have been *Trying to Save the Wild South*, given the odds stacked against some of these fragile plants), and Eubanks, a stalwart North Carolina writer and documentarian, takes care to portray the resilience of some of the South’s most iconic flora.

But readers might be surprised to learn that this book, despite its bounty of botanical information, is not really a book about plants at all. It’s a book about people. Behind each flimsy stalk of river cane, each seedling of a *Torreya* tree, each drooping blossom of Mayfield’s leather flower, there are whole communities of people who have made it their mission to safeguard these plants and steward them into the future. These individuals are as diverse as the plants themselves, spanning different generations, races, cultural backgrounds, religions, and scientific training, but all share a unique sense of ownership over the place Eubanks has dubbed the “Wild South.”

“The plants and trees discussed here, along with their human caretakers and defenders, stand for thousands more,” Eubanks writes (8). We meet these individuals as Eubanks found them, often appearing at first as mere silhouettes in the wilderness – figures hiking along cliffsides, ducking around waterfalls, or stopping to bend over a patch of plant life that would have been overlooked by the average hiker. Unlike most people who are hindered by

what Eubanks calls “plant blindness,” these are people who can gaze upon the green blur of wilderness and spot its disparate parts, understanding the role of each curling vine or blooming flower and knowing each by name as well.

To illustrate these stories, the book follows a format that would be well suited for a nature TV show. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction of the plant in question – whether that’s the Green Pitcher Plant, the Shoals Spider Lily, or the Yadkin River Goldenrod, to name just a few – along with its historical context. Eubanks writes with nerdy enthusiasm, often imbuing each plant with its own personality, so that readers come to know them as characters. Pitcher plants are “charismatic” (49). Miccosukee gooseberries are “disagreeable” and shaped like “dainty, dangling ballerinas.” Morefield’s leather flowers, meanwhile, are “whimsical” and shaped like “miniature hot air balloons” (63). Color photographs accompany these descriptions, giving readers a chance to try their hand at spotting these beauties in their own pocket of the Wild South.

After this brief primer, Eubanks sets out into the wilderness to find these unique plants, so that each chapter serves as its own self-contained episode that, together, tell a wider story. Sometimes these adventures begin with Eubanks hiking



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deep into dark forests; in other instances, she finds beautiful plant life on the side of the road. One notable episode begins with a humble meet-up in a Hardee’s parking lot.

If these plants are endangered, at least they are not on their own. The caretakers of these plants – whether they be botanists, amateur plant lovers, or self-taught sages – are just as vividly drawn by Eubanks. We meet people like Noah Yawn, a prodigy in his early twenties who made a name for himself in the botanical community when he was just an elementary school student, writing letters and cold-calling botanists so he could learn more about the wild world. We meet elder statesmen like Wilson Baker, now in his eighties,

who has been discovering new plants and protecting countless others since the 1960s. We meet characters whose voices are flavored with the rich molasses of Southern twang, even as they rattle off the Latin names of every pant in sight.

There are also Native people represented in these pages, such as Delassin George-Warren, a member of the Catawba Nation. “Roo,” as George-Warren is known by his friends, is working to restore the plant heritage and ecological knowledge of his people for future generations. “As we lost our land, the plants that depended on us began disappearing too, and then we lost our traditional knowledge of cultivation and caretaking,” Roo told Eubanks (186).

GEORGANN EUBANKS is a writer, teacher, and consultant to nonprofit groups across the country. She is director of the Table Rock Writers Workshop, was a founder of the North Carolina Writers’ Network, and is past chair of the North Carolina Humanities Council. She is the author of the *Literary Trails of North Carolina* series, published by the University of North Carolina Press for the North Carolina Arts Council. These volumes were reviewed in *NCLR* 2008 and 2011 and in *NCLR Online* 2014.

ABOVE Miccosukee Gooseberry (*Ribes echinellum*) in conservation at the University of North Carolina Botanical Gardens in Chapel Hill (all of the photographs in Eubanks’s books are by Donna Campbell)

In Eubanks' version of the Wild South, no one is separate from the land, and no plant should be cast aside. A measly flower that one stomps underfoot might very well be the source of the next great cancer treatment. Indeed, one particularly moving story Eubanks relates is that of Florida botanist Gail Fishman, who spent her childhood playing in patches of *Torreya* trees. Decades later, when she was diagnosed with uterine cancer, a drug made from the bark of that same tree was used to save her life.

But the end goal of conservation is not merely the protection of potentially useful plant species, as botanist Mincy Moffett told Eubanks. "My work is not just about plants that have some obvious value to humans," Moffett said. "Our ecosystems are intricate webs. If we keep pulling the strands out of the web, you never know which strand will make the whole web collapse" (144).

Eubanks relishes a nice poetic description, but this remains an educational book, full of interesting facts. Want to learn about the lucrative business of illegal plant poaching? You'll find that here. Did you know there are hidden black sites in the middle of the woods where rare plants can grow in secret? That's covered here as well. So are the complexities of plant tracking and the endless bureaucratic frustrations behind adding new

species to the endangered list.

Ultimately, this is a book about resilience – in both plants and people – despite how stark the odds may be. As one botanist told Eubanks, "We have to try."

If Eubanks strives to categorize and bring order to the green blur of our Southern wilderness, then North Carolina author and musician **Bland Simpson** offers an impressionistic counterpoint in his deceptively experimental new book *North Carolina: Land of Water, Land of Sky*.

Over his decades-long career, Simpson has quietly established himself as one of the region's most astute chroniclers of geography, history, and culture, with an unrivaled ability to blend personal and historical narratives into a cohesive whole. Still, when it comes to his writing, this "boy from the backwater swamps" is a tough one to pin down.

His latest book is no different. Ostensibly a travelogue, it is made up of vignettes that examine specific places and regions of North Carolina, from its inlets and swamps, to its foggy hills and mountains, to its ancient old growth forests, with plenty of pitstops at old diners and barbecue joints and historic churches along the way. Imagine going on a meandering journey across the state with your favorite grandfather, and that should give you an idea of what Simpson is going for here. You

get the feeling that if you were driving around with Simpson holding court in the passenger seat, he would be pointing out the window every few minutes, noting the history of each tree, rock, bridge, and shack.

All of this is written in a sort of utilitarian poetry. Yes, Simpson writes beautiful sentences that flow and weave and curl in on themselves, but wrapped within them are plenty of scientific and historical lessons that serve to justify their existence beyond beauty alone. Even the grumpiest of old men, who might despise frivolous things like poetry, will no doubt be warm and receptive to this style of writing. Simpson cut his teeth as a newspaper columnist in earlier decades, and you can still see remnants of that style of writing here. With each section often no more than a page or two, it's the perfect book to savor piecemeal each morning with your cup of coffee, as one might have perused the columns of the local newspaper back in the day.

By the way, as a physical object alone, this book is gorgeous. Sturdy as a coffee table book, its thick, glossy pages are a pleasure to flip through. And beautifully rendered color photographs, captured by Simpson's wife, Ann Cary Simpson, along with his friends, Tom Earnhardt and Scott D. Taylor, adorn practically every page.

There are a number of small linguistic pleasures to be

found in these pages. Simpson describes his father's voice as a "tideland tenor full of warmth," speaking from the "roll of wet places" in his memory. The Linville Gorge is a "grand ballroom for gravity." Horizons in the Blue Ridge Mountains reveal "most of forever," while locals gaze out with "mortal love" at the backdrafts of fog.

There are big history lessons, which reveal the gravity of small locales, and also small history lessons, which reveal the hidden personalities of these areas.

At one point, Simpson describes a story from remote Chatham County, in which a team of locals carved some two hundred pumpkins one Halloween and set the jack-o'-lanterns up at night on the nearby Chicken Bridge (so named because a poultry truck had once crashed on the bridge and sent chicken feathers flying everywhere). By that evening, word had spread about the jack-o'-lanterns, and the locals had come out in droves, young and old alike, to marvel at the sight of that glowing, pumpkin-adorned bridge. "The sense of collective delight was palpable," Simpson writes, adding that this "unheralded, unadvertised theatrical affair . . . this majestic delight of illumination" had spread incalculable joy among the locals who stopped by to see it (107).

What Simpson has created with this book is no different



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM EARNHARDT.
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from those pumpkins: largely unadvertised, unheralded beyond the reaches of our own locality, and yet beautiful and majestic in its own right. Will those jack-o'-lanterns ever end up in some lavish museum in New York City? No, of course not. But the children whose parents lovingly toted them out to the edge of the Haw River to gaze upon those glowing pumpkins will likely remember and appreciate that memory far longer than any framed painting hung in a museum, just as the North Carolinians who flip through the pages of Simpson's book will likely remember and appreciate his own "majestic illimitation" of our region far more than they would remember the latest *New York Times* Bestseller.

North Carolina: Land of Water, Land of Sky, along with Eubank's *Saving the Wild South*, are both books that will no doubt rest comfortably in a cherished spot on a family bookshelf for years to come, waiting to be rediscovered by the next generation.

Of course, one can only hope that the dogged fight against habitat loss as portrayed by Eubanks will be looked back upon as the start of a larger movement toward stewardship over our region, rather than the last gasps of a futile effort. Just as one can only hope that the poetic, beautiful, majestic vision of North Carolina as painted by Simpson is looked back upon as a praise song of a familiar landscape, rather than an elegy for all we've lost. ■

BLAND SIMPSON, a long-time contributor to *NCLR*, is Kenan Distinguished Professor of English & Creative Writing at UNC Chapel Hill where he has taught since 1982. He is the pianist and composer of the tony Award-winning string band the Red Clay Ramblers. His numerous awards and honors include the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts and induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. Read more about him in the induction story published in *NCLR Online Winter 2023*.

ABOVE Ancient Cypresses in Three Sisters Swap on Black River