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Wilma Dykeman:

Homegrown Appalachian Environmentalism

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An oft forgotten or minimized area of literature is that which is regional, especially that of Appalachia. Though often relegated to the forgotten, the literature of Appalachia, especially the works written by natives of the region, can offer keen insights. The insights offered by the writings of the insiders of Appalachia can teach their readers about the uniqueness of the region, but also the universal themes that arise out of common human experience. Wilma Dykeman, a native of the mountains near Asheville, North Carolina, wrote about her native region but focused on the universal themes underlying the unique experiences she related. She especially focused on confronting the issues facing that region, particularly environmental degradation.

Wilma Dykeman through her writings, starting in 1955 with her first book *The French Broad*, and activism led the emergence of environmental consciousness and activism in Appalachia. Confronting stereotypes of Appalachia in her works she sought to explore the Appalachian region as an insider explaining it, especially its unique qualities to an outside world. This exploration, in part, confronted the environmental destruction that threatened Appalachia and she entreated, especially the locals, to recognize that harm and engage in personal activism to save their natural treasures. Though Wilma Dykeman personally advocated for environmental protections in Appalachia she believed that activism for environmental preservation should be universal. Thus learning from the dilemmas of others on a universal basis of common understanding, her principles of activism in Appalachia are applicable to anywhere else.

Wilma Dykeman rose from a resurgence of Appalachian literature in the first half of the 20th century epitomized by regional works created by authors native to that region. Earlier Appalachian literature was written by color writers. These were often outsiders, short-term visitors gathering quaint facts, that focused on the ordinary lives of the mountain people and

highlighted their quaint ways as somewhat of a nostalgic glimpse of the past.¹ This literature was often condescending towards a backwards people, that though interesting, were bound for extermination by the relentless push of modernization and urbanization.² This local color writing was especially prominent in the last half of the 19th century, but faded out of style at the beginning of the 20th century.

Resurgence in Appalachian literature began in mid-century as local authors sought to document their heritage. This literature, like color writers, focused on the culture and people of Appalachia, but it was written by natives of the mountains interested in documenting a culture fast disappearing to the civilizing march of industrialization. A notable difference in the tone of the resurgent literature centered on its lack of condescension to the people or culture of Appalachia. They wrote to celebrate a unique way of life, not to entertain with the quirks of the backwoods people, but an examination of that other way of life. They also incorporated local issues such as environmental concerns or social organization into their writings. The prominent author, historian, and activist Wilma Dykeman had a career in Appalachian literature that is exemplary of the resurgent Appalachian writer.

Born May 20, 1920 near Asheville, North Carolina, to eccentric parents—her father a retired dairy farmer from upstate New York and, thirty-five years his junior, her mother a young belle of Asheville —Wilma Dykeman grew up in Appalachia strongly influenced by her parents' exploration and travel in that area and mutual love of the “mountains, history, language, and

¹Patricia M. Gantt, “‘A Mutual Journey’: Wilma Dykeman and Appalachian Regionalism,” in *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer (Iowa City, IA: University Of Iowa Press, 1997), 47, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 28, 2017).

²Patricia Miller Gantt, “‘Appalachia in context’: Wilma Dykeman's search for the Souths” (PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1993), 16-17, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://ezproxy.southern.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/304053457?accountid=28568>.

books.”³ Later reflecting on the lessons she learned from them that were influential on her writings, she recalled “I learned that no corner of the world was without wonder, that every living creature or plant or drop of water holds miracles if we would look, listen, think, relate.”⁴ In 1940 she graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in English, history, and speech, then that summer while home preparing to move to New York City for a job, friends introduced her to James Stokely, Jr. of Newport, Tennessee.⁵ Within days a relationship blossomed, as Dykeman explains it, “we discovered that we were both interested in woods and words.”⁶ Dykeman and Stokely married in October of 1940 and remained so, happily and fruitfully, until his unexpected death in 1977. They had two sons and collaborated on several books throughout their careers. Dykeman wrote eighteen books, fiction and nonfiction, wrote as a columnist for the Knoxville *News-Sentinel* and Newport *Plain Talk*, penned multiple other articles, and lectured across the country.⁷ She was also influential in her community, especially her involvement in establishing the river walk in Asheville, N.C., and was involved in Berea College, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and the University of North Carolina.⁸ Wilma Dykeman died on December 22, 2006, leaving a legacy, not only to Appalachian literature, but also to the community environmental activism that she championed throughout her career.

³Melissa Walker, “Wilma Dykeman (1920-2006): The Hearth and the Map,” in *Tennessee Women: Their Lives Times*, vol. 1, ed. Sarah Wilkerson Freeman and Beverly Greene Bond (Athen, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 247.

⁴Wilma Dykeman, “The Past is Never Dead. It's Not Even Past,” in *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*, ed. Joyce Dyer (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 107.

⁵Gantt, 6; Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt and Elizabeth Sims, “Wilma Dykeman: A Biography of ‘Woods and Words,’” *Appalachian Heritage* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 21, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/510315>.

⁶Engelhardt and Sims, 22.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid, 24.

As an author Wilma Dykeman combined regional writing with exploring the region's uniqueness to find underlying universal themes that could resonate with anyone in the common human experience. In an interview Wilma Dykeman explained how she saw herself as an author, "I am a woman, and I live in the mountains, and I live in the South, and I am an American."⁹ She continued to explain that she personally disliked the term Appalachian author because she did not like being labeled and pigeon-holed into a certain style, topic, or way of writing. Dykeman preferred that the central focus be on authors' expressing their unique perceptions through writing, on whatever topic or style they chose, not conformity with their assigned labels. This idea animated her writings which were in multiple styles, such as her novel *The Tall Woman* (1962), her volume on a river *The French Broad* (1955), her histories *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain 1780* (1991), or her biography of birth control activist Edna McKinnon, *Too Many People, Too Little Love* (1974). In addition she also wrote articles for newspapers, magazines, and contributions to other books. Throughout her extensive writing Dykeman never wrote by the dictates of labels; she chose topics that were meaningful to her which often happened to be on topics relating to Appalachia.

To facilitate her broad scope of writing, Wilma Dykeman defined Appalachian literature as "that which has been written in Appalachia or about Appalachia, or by people who have lived or still live in Appalachia. You don't have to have lived here all your life, and you don't have to have written just about it [the region]. It's anything in the context of Appalachia."¹⁰ This definition allowed Dykeman to avoid, as much as possible, assigning labels to authors that might

⁹Sandra L. Ballard, "Wilma Dykeman: An Interview," *Now and Then* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 18, accessed February 27, 2017, https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED313194

¹⁰Ballard, 19.

tend to limit them to a certain genre, but also allowed acknowledgement of Appalachian writing as a type of regional writing. She utilized this genre because she believed “the world’s best literature is regional, in the largest sense of the the word. Discovering all that is unique to a place, or a person, and relating it to the universal of human experience may be old fashioned, but I feel it is one of the challenges of writing.”¹¹ Through her writing Dykeman tried to show her readers that the big issues are rooted in a particular place. She wanted her works to connect a place, the local and unique of regionalism, to the common human experience—life, death, change, etc. She used her connectedness and intimate knowledge of a place to write on issues that affect everyone, thus transcending that place and touching others who also experience that, in a way becoming universal through the common human experience.

Writing on an extensive variety of topics Wilma Dykeman always had an underlying theme in her works. She sought to transcend the particularities of a time and place with a universal understanding of the common human experiences since she believed that “every life, no matter how inconsequential in the tide of nationalities, has overtones of the universal and themes which are common to all men and all nature.”¹² Though she wrote to foster a universal understanding between people whether the civil rights’ activist, the communist ruled Chinese farmer or urban European, she never overlooked the uniqueness of the experience of each individual. Combining her understanding of the individual and the universal she explained, “The life of one human is the life of every other living thing on earth which must eat and seek the sun and reproduce. It is the life of every other human. Yet, at the same time, it is something unique

¹¹Walker, 245.

¹²Wilma Dykeman, *Family of Earth: A Southern Mountain Childhood*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 2.

to him, something different from any other life that has ever been. All life is kin and all men are brothers, yet each is a stranger, one to the other, and will always be so.”¹³ Creating thorough and accurate works that provoked examination and touched on universal themes, Dykeman used the unique culture and geography that she knew best.

Another theme evident in many of Dykeman’s works is what scholar Fred Hobson has called the “rage to explain,” Dykeman using her pen in an effort to accurately interpret the South to the outside world. She sought to combat the one-sided, inaccurate depictions of the South and confront its social issue such as race and gender through her diverse writing styles all firmly founded in a strong sense of place.¹⁴ The eighteen fiction and nonfiction books that flowed from Dykeman’s diverse and prolific pen were primarily based in the Appalachian South incorporating three broad themes: waste of human and natural resources, the persistence of the past in the present, and the challenging choices of change facing the ordinary person.¹⁵ Two books that explore these themes and set the trajectory for her later writings are *The French Broad* and *The Tall Women*, her first nonfiction and fiction works respectively.

Wilma Dykeman’s first book, *The French Broad*, explored people’s dependence on the river, the destruction caused by urban and commercial pollution, and dispelling the stereotypes of the region. Published in 1955, it was the first of the Rivers of America series that touched on pollution. Describing her inspiration for *The French Broad* she stated "I'd always been aware of the great natural resources we have here [in Appalachia], and I became very concerned about the water pollution. I mean, this river that has been destroyed because, again, of greed and

¹³Dykeman, 10.

¹⁴Walker, 246.

¹⁵Ibid.

selfishness and apathy on all of our parts."¹⁶ Dykeman catalogued the river, its flora and fauna, and diverse people, then traced the origins of pollution and destruction of the environment to the first settlers. She noted that the very qualities that drew people were the ones that they were destroying—the pristine forests and water—and she called on her fellow mountain citizens to defend the river through activism following in the vein of earlier women environmentalists, such as Emma Bell Miles, Grace MacGowen Cooke, and Maristan Chapman.¹⁷ Enumerating Dykeman's themes in *The French Broad*, Patricia Gantt, an eminent scholar of her works, explains, "Dykeman's primary concern in [*The French Broad*] is the waste of natural resources through lumbering and water pollution," Gantt continues to identify the importance of *The French Broad* on her future works, it "was a pivotal work for Dykeman's literary career[for in it] she found her lasting themes—Appalachia's struggle for economic and educational progress, its endangered environmental resources, its troublesome popular image—especially that of historically overlooked Appalachian women."¹⁸ This was her most notably explicit book on environmental themes, but in later works, especially her novels, these themes were artfully woven into the story as exemplified by *The Tall Women*.¹⁹

Though less obviously environmental, such themes can be found in Dykeman's most famous book by implementing ecofeminism—an intriguing theory for the analysis of environmental themes in literature. This theory considers the intersection and interdependence

¹⁶Nancy K. Jentsch and Danny L. Miller, "Lighting the Fuse: Wilma Dykeman and Sharyn McCrumb as Appalachian 'Activists,'" In *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original readings in Appalachian Women's Studies*, ed. Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 76.

¹⁷Walker, 251.

¹⁸Jentsch and Miller, 76-7.

¹⁹Jentsch and Miller, 76; Walker, 251.

of social and environmental issues resulting in linking the solution of one to that of the other.²⁰ It specifically focuses on the destruction of environment leading to the exploitation of the marginalized people in that area, usually through a masculine hierarchy that prioritizes industrial and capital gain, thus providing a lens for analyzing Appalachian literature that recognizes and connects social and environmental oppression.²¹ Holly Cian in her masters thesis exploring the exploitation of women and nature in Appalachia, used ecofeminism to approach Wilma Dykeman's *The Tall Women*. Cian finds the protagonist of the book, Lydia McQueen, as an environmentally focused leader and nurturer in her community and family that goes against the patriarchal hierarchy by assuming the responsibilities of father and mother of her family during her husbands long absences serving in the Civil War and later exploring the West.²² Also highlighted is the cost of environmental development when a rich local and biggest taxpayer, Ham Nelson, uses his clout to oppose the building of a local school because he did not want school to interfere with his ability to hire hands to work his tobacco fields. Throughout the book Dykeman parallels Ham and Lydia thus allowing their principles to be seen, "Ham values profit and agricultural progress often at the expense of the environment and the community, whereas Lydia values the environment and community far above profit or investment."²³ In the conclusion of the book the consequences of each are starkly compared. Lydia, cleaning a spring on Ham's land, drinks contaminated water caused by his stripping the land for economic gain—

²⁰Holly Rose Cian, "The Exploitation of Women and Nature in Appalachia: An Analysis of Labor Rights and Environmental Issues as Presented by Three Appalachian Women Writers" (master's thesis, Western Carolina University, 2016), 5, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://ezproxy.southern.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1789297912?accountid=28568>

²¹Ibid., 8,9.

²²Ibid., 35.

²³Ibid., 38-9.

logging in this instance—and contracts typhoid and dies shortly there after. Focusing on that ending, Cian concludes her analysis that “Dykeman reestablishes her claim that the values of nature and the social and ecological dangers of destroying the environment are in fact connected, and she urges her reader to recognize these connections.”²⁴ Giving insight into her underlying reasoning for this tragic culmination, Dykeman explains, “Lydia McQueen dies of typhoid fever not just because of a whim of mine, but as a symbol of the waste from a spring that has been polluted by the sawdust of this old mill. . . she contracts typhoid and this most valuable character in this community is lost because of this kind of waste.”²⁵ Again prominent themes in her writing, stewardship of resources, human and natural, and the environmental pollution of Appalachia, are made poignantly evident.²⁶ Thus, beyond identifying environmental themes in Dykeman’s writings, ecofeminism can be utilized to analyze Appalachian literature for the correlation of important connections between social and environmental oppression and, once discerned, can guide in the combating of those issues.

The most fundamental principles in Wilma Dykeman’s writings is that of finding the universally applicable themes in the the unique experiences or problems of a place by connecting through the common human experience. Also integral in her works is an emphasis on the use of resources—human and environmental. She strongly believed in the value of all resources and accordingly the universal human responsibility to use wisely and care for resources since they are not expendable but ours to preserve and pass to the next generation. Wilma Dykeman’s exposition of environmental concerns as a universal problem cause her writings, though often

²⁴Ibid., 51.

²⁵Jentsch and Miller, 77.

²⁶Ibid., 76.

relegated to the annals of the forgotten regionalist, to transcend that of a region. They are applicable on a universal level for their recognition of environmental issues and their call to combat and solve these issues especially through personal activism. She challenges her readers to use personal activism to preserve and care for their unique diminishing resources, not only for themselves but for posterity.

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