



PROJECT MUSE®

*The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers
Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*
(review)

Michael Buseman

West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies, New Series, Volume
1, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 98-100 (Review)

Published by West Virginia University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wvh.2008.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/236010>

intention of O'Donnell or the series' editors. Rather, *Ohio's First Peoples* is intended as a summation of Native Americans in the Ohio region and, toward that end, it is successful. To expect anything more from a work that covers two thousand years of indigenous history in less than one hundred and thirty pages (excluding footnotes and bibliography) is unrealistic. This book is generally well-written and easy to read, though we are reminded five times in chapter three that, indeed, Captain White Eyes was dead. O'Donnell's strongest chapters deal with the American Revolution and beyond, which is reflected in a fluid narrative that demonstrates his familiarity with the primary sources, as well as his command of historical events and processes during the late eighteenth century. As no modern treatment exists of native peoples in Ohio from their arrival to removal, O'Donnell should therefore be congratulated for highlighting the experiences of the Buckeye State's indigenous populations.

Tyler Boulware
West Virginia University

The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America. By Jeff Biggers. (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006. Pp. 238.)

It has been the recent goal of Appalachian scholars to recapitulate and rehabilitate the historical legacy and meaning of the mountain South. As early as the 1970s, historians, sociologists, and other academics challenged oversimplified, condescending, and downright offensive portrayals of the region by confronting these stereotypes head-on with sophisticated, less emotional studies of Appalachia on the local and regional level. Recently, this revisionist impulse has extended into the realm of social critics and media outlets. Through his 2006 work entitled *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*, writer and National Public Radio correspondent Jeff Biggers takes the fight for Appalachian respectability to the reading public.

Biggers, writing like a born-again Appalachian firebrand (he was not aware of his mountain heritage until 1983), argues that "the Southern Appalachians have been in the vanguard in determining that American destiny" (211). Biggers admits that his work is not definitive in its scope. However, he passionately maintains that Appalachia, with its cutting-edge colonial rebels, abolitionists, linguists, writers and publishers, musicians, and activists, "endowed the nation with an enduring and conflicting treasury

of innovations and innovators" (xii-xv). While his entertaining vignettes aptly prove that Appalachia was in fact ahead of its time in many ways, *The United States of Appalachia* sometimes crumbles under the weight of its author's enthusiasm.

A quick glance at the author's bibliographic notes reveals that Biggers did his homework when putting together this compendium. His stories are roughly chronological and placed fairly well within the historical context in which they occur. He has a firm grasp of Appalachian historiography's most important secondary sources and ably uses primary documents. Biggers's contextual skill is particularly evident in his chapter one discussion of the Cherokee linguist Sequoyah's development of a native alphabet. The eventual development of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, America's first bilingual newspaper published by an indigenous population, proves interesting enough in and of itself (40). However, it is the author's skillful use of Wilma Dunaway's work on the Appalachian frontier to create a meaningful context for Sequoyah's innovation that is particularly impressive.

As a writer himself, it is perhaps no surprise that Biggers's most effective arguments involve the literary vanguard of Appalachia. His chapter six discussion of proto-muckraker and West Virginian Rebecca Harding Davis is particularly authoritative. Harding Davis's 1861 short story entitled "Life in the Iron Mills" blew the lid off working and living conditions in Appalachian iron mills. Biggers argues that this story represented a seismic shift in popular literature. Harding Davis's harsh content predated French literary naturalism by a full six years (135). Additionally, her shocking story appeared almost fifty years before Upton Sinclair kickstarted American muckraking journalism.

Unfortunately, not all of the author's vignettes hit the mark. Chapter two leaves the reader wondering about the enduring importance of the North Carolina/Tennessee borderland's rebellious and short-lived "District of Washington" as America's "First Washington, D.C." While residents of the district were ahead of their time in resisting British influence via secession, they (like so many other Appalachians in history) were not particularly numerous and were eventually folded into the larger, colonial resistance (46). Additionally, while Biggers admits that his work is not a definitive history of the region, he sometimes oversimplifies or glosses over the historical events and movements that either interact with or comprise his stories of a vanguard Appalachia. For example, his chapter six discussion of the West Virginia Mine Wars, while informed by many of the subject's best studies, is a bit superficial, and his discussion of Appalachian mountaintop removal

in the epilogue seems gratuitous as Biggers concludes his argument.

Reading *The United States of Appalachia* feels good. After years of abuse, natives and scholars of the region like to hear good things about the mountains. Biggers is a skilled writer and his main argument that Appalachia was ahead of its time in many areas is compelling. However, being the first to do something does not guarantee lasting historical relevance or importance. The author is full of enthusiasm and he is a true believer, but there are times when *The United States of Appalachia* feels more like Appalachia-centrism and regional boosterism than effective history.

Michael Buseman
West Virginia University

Behind Bayonets: The Civil War in Northern Ohio. By David D. Van Tassel, with John Vacha. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006. Pp. 125.)

The Civil War continues to be a topic of nearly infinite fascination with countless books being published on the conflict each year. An unfortunate by-product of this profusion of material is that it has forced historians, driven by the never-ending quest for innovation, to explore subjects of an increasingly narrow focus. During the past decade alone, books have appeared on such obscure topics as Civil War time-keeping, Civil War buglers, and Civil War balloonists. At first glance one might be tempted to place *Behind Bayonets* in this category, but in fact this book has much to offer both professional historians and the general reader.

The subject has much to recommend it—Ohio played a vital role in the Northern war effort and contributed more than 300,000 troops and 230 regiments to the Union cause, numbers surpassed only by those of New York and Pennsylvania. Additionally Ohio was also home to many of the war's key players such as Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, along with several military commanders including William Sherman (whose brother John served as one of Ohio's U.S. senators), and future presidents Ulysses S. Grant, William McKinley, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield.

While it carries the subtitle *The Civil War in Northern Ohio*, the main focus of *Behind Bayonets* is the city of Cleveland and its environs. The choice of Cleveland is a good one. With a population of about 43,000 people in 1860, Cleveland was both an important commercial center and a stronghold of the Republican Party and the antislavery movement (radical abolitionist John Brown hailed from nearby Hudson, Ohio). Cleveland was also home