

THE PRIDE AND PREJUDICE OF DON WEST

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I spent several years obsessed with resurrecting the legacy of a largely dismissed Appalachian poet-activist. Not entirely dismissed: In 1946, Don West became a national literary phenomenon, managing to sell untold thousands of copies of a collection of quatrain folk ballads and labor poems, *Clods of Southern Earth*, which should have forever etched him a place in the literary canons of the region. Truth is, during the years I researched West's wiles, interviewed associates, and collected his papers from the remote corners of the hills and hollows and urban back warrens—most of West's personal papers had been lost in a series of mysterious fires—I was more in turmoil about how to deal with his hard times and its relevance today than his forgotten life.

In the fall of 1999, seven years after Don had died, his books had gone out of print (and it grieved me that the generation of Appalachian scholars, activists, publishers, editors, and writers that came of age in his shadow had shamefully allowed his work to stay out of print for well over a decade), and his legacy had disappeared into the mountain fog; I embarked on a journey with one question: Does Don West still matter to Appalachia, and the nation?

I first met West in the early summer of 1983. I was 19, a dropout from the University of California. I had just gone through a wild nine-month tour of duty in Berkeley's corridors, spending more time in jail and at leftist political meetings than in classrooms. I failed to finish my last quarter. Returning from a stint in jail for a demonstration in central California, I was involved in a tragic car accident, which resulted in the death of a young woman. I was at the wheel. Still in a daze, I eventually took a Greyhound across the country, and then started hitching and hiking through the South, drifting into the Blue Ridge. I was angry, resentful, and adrift. I had lost faith in the power of education, politics, or even activism. Don West saved my life that summer.

Here are his bona fides as I see them. Raised by sharecroppers from North Georgia, influenced as much by the self-reliant wisdom of his

mountaineer grandfather as the off-putting, patronizing education he received at the well-known Berry School, the dirt-poor but resourceful West put himself through Lincoln Memorial and Vanderbilt universities at the same time the Southern Agrarian literary movement took the stage in the late 1920s. But West was no backwards-looking antebellum sycophant; he wrote poetry as a way of giving voice to his own neglected heritage, traveled outside any academic comfort zone to face the violent strikes in coal camps and mill towns, earned a bachelor's in divinity studies, journeyed around Scandinavia and Europe to examine the cooperative movement and adult folk schools, and returned to the South to launch his own revolution in the mountains.

The youthful West was anything but artless, naïve, and malleable. He possessed a tremendous sense of place and self-confidence, at home among urban sophisticates in the United States and Europe, as much as he felt at ease among farmers and backwoods sawyers. Raised by radical Republicans in a part of Appalachia that had supported both the Union and Confederacy, West had rejected the emerging media hillbilly stereotypes for his proper place in the South's progressive vanguard early in his life.

Don West intended to make history, on his own terms, on his native ground.

In 1932 he cofounded the Highlander Folk School, which became the training center for the Civil Rights Movement. As one of the lonely activists in the generation before the glorious Montgomery Bus Boycott, he went underground and defended a radical black (Communist) leader in Atlanta in the mid-1930s. Wanted dead or alive by the Atlanta authorities, he fled the state and became a union organizer for millworkers and miners in the Carolinas and Kentucky and was occasionally beaten and jailed, often forced to quietly return to work his farm in Georgia or pastor churches in small towns. Not too quietly: In a top secret FBI file, West was added to a proposed list of dangerous Americans who should be interned during World War II. In fact, one memo referred to the poet as the most dangerous man in the South.

There were some good times. After turning a small Georgia school district into an acclaimed model of transformative pedagogy and cooperative learning during the war years, he took a teaching job at

Oglethorpe University in Atlanta and returned to the national literary scene with his *Clods of Southern Earth*. In 1946, celebrated New York publishers Boni and Gaer announced the release of West's record-breaking volume of poetry. Here is where his secret life began to haunt him.

During all of these years, riding an Indian Chief motorcycle across the mountains and down the East Coast, West had left a legacy of poems in his wake, as author John Egerton has written, like a phantom revolutionary—poems that unveiled the miseries of mill hands, miners, and sharecroppers, and the hopes of justice and racial unity in the South. His pioneering work reclaimed Appalachia as a progressive region and purveyor of the good life. For a while, he became the proverbial people's poet, lionized by the Leftists in Greenwich Village in New York City, his work passed out at rallies and memorized by miners and farmworkers who had never held any book but the King James Bible in their lives.

As an angry young man back in the early 1930s, West had declared in verse, "I am a Communist," to glorify his dramatic causes and provide a nativist claim to a foreign ideology. This was the bottom line for West in 1933, and perhaps for fellow travelers like Woody Guthrie and Langston Hughes: Only the wild-eyed Reds had the guts to take on the unremitting terrorism of the racist South and the relentless capitalists ravaging the region's minerals, forests, farms, and workforce. In the era of the Harlan County mining wars in the 1930s, where Florence Reece, a coalminer's wife, wrote the ballad, "Which Side Are You On?" Don West came of age and took sides.

Hounded and red-baited by newspaper after newspaper in the late 1940s and 1950s, West drifted into oblivion, losing job after job, called time and again into the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings that popped up in the South with the regularity of catfish fries. In one of the most unusual persecutions in American literary history, West's poetry was often used against him at hearings and in newspaper editorials. Destitute, he even took to peddling vegetables from his garden on the streets of Atlanta in the 1950s. The Ku Klux Klan added a final touch, burning down his farm and his collection of books, manuscripts, and family heirlooms. After editing a newspaper in a mill town in North Georgia during a volatile period, he even had to

flee a lynch mob. Scurrying across the back mountain roads, West shot his way out of a jam when a car attempted to drive him off the road. He finally left the South in exile.

When I was literally dropped on Don West's doorstep in the 1980s, he had returned to Appalachia as one of the elder statesmen in its folk revival. He had become a link between the Old Left and New Left activists in the 1960s and had founded a new folk school and farm, the Appalachian South Folklife Center in West Virginia, which had become a hub of activity for young Appalachians in search of their history and progressive culture, as well as a meeting place for union members and environmentalists—two sides of development in the coalfields of West Virginia that rarely shared the same mess halls. His poetry returned to print and sold thousands. His role as an Appalachian historian became more poignant with a series of pamphlets he printed in his barn in the tradition of his hero, Thomas Paine.

I worked on West's farm that first summer of our meeting. I attended classes he set up for school dropouts and mountain youth in an employment program. We listened in awe at West's poetry readings and his lessons on the heroic role of mountaineers in the American Revolution and Civil War. "Remember," he would shout, "we didn't burn any witches in these hollows."

Don was mercurial, unyielding, and purposeful. His personal story as a fearless, impassioned, and self-sacrificing working-class hero overshadowed his more creative endeavors. And, in many respects, this led to his dismissal by academics who derided West's history lessons for their glorification of Appalachian heritage as a sort of hackneyed 1960s "identity" movement ploy, or worse, a sentimental romantic revision of the past. Literary critics disparaged his writing as overly simple, didactic, and tedious, as they had since West's first book of poetry appeared in the early 1930s.

Reviewing West's latest version of his collected poems, *In a Land of Plenty*, in 1983, East Tennessee novelist and scholar Richard Marius summed up much of the academic view by first declaring, "It is hard to say anything bad about a good man like Don West," before lambasting West for his empty lines of political poetry.

I saw something different in the pride and prejudice of Don West.

In the evenings, I often loitered near West's front porch, where I would join him for long walks along the back roads. He recounted the details of his exploits in the 1930s with fire in his eyes. He planted the idea of attending the Danish Folk Schools, which I would follow up several years later. Beyond any political cause or ideology of a political party, such as the communist party, or any standard literary achievements, West spoke passionately about the power of storytelling, poetry, and music in enlivening our daily struggles and personal lives, and the powerlessness of those who had been deracinated, displaced, and had allowed their history to be silenced, or worse, trivialized by those who did not understand it.

"The abuse of the people always goes hand in hand with the abuse of the land," he admonished.

This was no romantic or chauvinistic sentiment about Appalachia; no one shuddered more at provincialism than West, who had doggedly traveled the globe in search of ideas, and the shared experiences of other comrades, and considered himself a world citizen. Instead, having literally spent his life on the barricades of conflict, West saw himself as a witness to the historical resistance against the oppressive forces in the region. This profound sense of rootedness both liberated him and forever burdened him to personify the entangled beauty, marginalization, and the terrible history of his native land and its inhabitants. He once recalled his experience in Eastern Kentucky in the early 1930s when he was doing his research for his thesis at Vanderbilt University. He traveled on horseback through Knott County, collecting data for a sociological survey. West often fell back on narrative poetry to explain his results. He wrote:

The stranger or "furriner" never sees the real heart of the highland people. They come into the mountains, praise their beauty and grandeur with high flung words, and the highlander can't see just why they should run on that way. To the mountain man the mountains are a matter of course. They are part of him in a sense. He feels them and lives with them. He is not unappreciative as some have said. But the mountains may have a grip on his soul that would give vent to such an expression as:

“You are mine,
you chopped ridges,
you scarred and ragged hills!
I am a part of you,
you are a part of me.

Do you know that a mountain man
has gone from you?
You mountains,
silhouette against
a facing sun-down sky.
Did you feel the surge
of my pulse beat
when I flung myself
on your breast
and sifted your porous soil
through my fingers?
Did you know that
a human soul was there
in stark nakedness
where cold stars shone down
above Troublesome?

Did it mean anything to you
the thing you had done to me?
Do you know that you
have set me free
and made a slave of me?
You Cumberlands,
tender and terrible!
You give men life and beauty,
take life and leave desolation!
Lying motionless
in the misty moonlight,
fringed by a gloaming
sylvan green,
streaked by streams of
silver song.”

Don concluded his thesis with a challenge, aimed at his youthful self (in his 20s) more than the “mountain boy” in “pitched overalls” in Kentucky:

What will you do for your hills,
You mountain boy?

This much was clear for the next six decades: West pressed that question on everyone he ever met, with little mercy. He didn't suffer the breathless academics with no dirt in their fingernails or calluses on their hands or jail records to prove their commitment to social justice; he didn't suffer middle-class liberal do-gooders who would walk away when a fight broke out. He had been beaten, jailed, burned out, blacklisted, and despised much of his life for his beliefs; he had allowed hurt and heartbreak among his family. Fairly or unfairly, he demanded the same commitment from anyone who claimed to be an activist or a writer or an Appalachian. The rest of us were dilettantes.

He was also deeply caring and personal. I often tagged along with Don as he took his truck into rugged back hollows and abandoned coal camps and delivered food and books. I marveled at the way he would quietly listen to the travails of folks living on the edge of despair. He was never patronizing.

Some of West's poetry now raises the hair on the back of my neck with its clichés and slogans, much in the way some of Pablo Neruda's and Langston Hughes' genius was derailed into mottos for ideological wags. But I am old enough to realize that this artistic Achilles heel, shaped by the angry 1930s and the proletarian poets and their world unhinged, doesn't liquidate the rest of West's groundbreaking work or the value of its contribution to miners, millworkers, sharecroppers, and others. In a harrowing period in the South, and our nation, West's poetry and vision of history mattered.

I think it still matters today. “You cannot understand America,” West once told me, “until you understand Appalachia.” I don't believe this sentiment reflected some superficial chauvinistic pride in his native region, but an understanding of the clash of cultures, interests, and land rights, and the emergence of a quintessential and

often overlooked American legacy and struggle for justice on the frontier of westward expansion and the frontlines of southeastern industrialization.

Beyond any political cause, I think it also reflected a man's lifelong search to understand his native land. In a recovered chapbook from the early 1930s, *Deep, Deep Down in Living*, West wrote his "Epitaph":

for myself

Bones rest here of a mountaineer.
His place another fills.
He gained from life all that he sought.
The friendship of the hills.