

# JIM WAYNE MILLER

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Jim Wayne Miller (1936–1996) is quite simply an icon in the field of Appalachian Literature—one of its earliest and most ardent supporters. Fred Chappell has commented that “if it were not for Miller, the Appal-lit movement might have foundered before it got started.” Although the focus of Miller’s very impressive writing, his compelling public speaking, and his quietly effective leadership was the field of Appalachian Literature and Appalachian Studies, he was guided by a truly international consciousness. Often, those who feel they know his work well are surprised to learn that his academic field was German, not English or the social sciences.

Jim Wayne Miller lived life intensely. He drank prodigious amounts of coffee and smoked many cigarettes throughout every day and liked a good bourbon during his long nights. When talking to either an individual or a group, he listened intently and responded enthusiastically. He carried his erudition perhaps more gracefully than anyone I’ve ever met—never intruding upon a conversation in a showy way, and typically seeking out ways to learn from those who so often eagerly gathered around him. I don’t recall Jim Wayne Miller ever leaving a conversation to go to bed. Even after dawn, he would always be in the last group to retire for the night. He worked hard, and he played hard. He was an avid fisherman, and any unfilled blocks of time would quickly be spent at a lake or river. He titled one of his poetry books *Nostalgia for 70* referring to his desire for higher speed limits. Indeed, he seemed to always be on the road—driving all the way from Bowling Green, Kentucky, to practically any kind of regional literary event throughout the Appalachian Region. For several summers in the 1980s, he led simultaneous seminars at both the University of Tennessee and Appalachian State University in North Carolina—simply driving back-and-forth across the mountains to present in both places almost every day. His car was a cacophony of papers and books and coffee cups, and I remember more than one morning at the Appalachian Writers Workshop at Hindman

Settlement School—even though he had a bed he could go to—I found him, as I walked to breakfast, fast asleep in the driver’s seat of his car, amidst a tumult of books and papers—characteristically more often by other authors rather than his own work. Robert Morgan, in his Jim Wayne Miller Memorial Lecture at the Hindman Settlement School in 1997, commented on Jim’s car:

Perhaps the major archive of Appalachian literature at the time was contained in the back seat and trunk of his gray Buick. Wherever he went, to Hindman, to Boone, to Asheville, or the West Virginia Writers Conference, he carried his collection of files, books, lists, bibliographies, Xerox copies and works in progress. In conversations at Hindman, when an obscure poem or essay might be mentioned, Jim Wayne would hurry out to his car to dig up a copy.

Perhaps nobody has given more talks on Appalachian Studies and regional literature than Jim Wayne Miller, yet he never gave a reading that consisted primarily of his own very impressive body of work. Instead, he would share his enthusiasm for other regional writers by reading passages and expressing joy over the writings of others.

The impact that Jim Wayne Miller has had upon regional literature is huge. Almost ten years after his death, participants in the Appalachian Writers Workshop at Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky spontaneously began a lasting tradition of reading “The Brier Sermon,” one of his signature poems, aloud. Wednesday nights at the Workshop are devoted to a Jim Wayne Miller Lecture. Another Memorial Lecture occurs each year at Western Kentucky University, where he taught throughout his career.

Jim Wayne Miller was born in 1936 and raised with five brothers and sisters on a seventy-acre farm in western Buncombe County, North Carolina. The farmhouses of both sets of grandparents were nearby. His mother’s people were tenant farmers, while his father’s people were relatively well-educated and prosperous landowners. Jim Wayne’s father was the service manager at a Firestone Complete Auto Care in Asheville. In 1954, Jim Wayne Miller entered Berea College in Kentucky. He spent the summer of his junior year in Germany

with the Experiment in International Living. In 1958, he graduated and married classmate Mary Ellen Yates, a native of Carter County in Eastern Kentucky. His first job was teaching German and English at Fort Knox, but in 1960 he got an National Defense Education Act Fellowship to study those subjects at Vanderbilt University. His two sons were both born in Nashville while he was doing graduate work there.

In 1963, Jim Wayne Miller accepted a teaching position at Western Kentucky University in the Department of Modern Languages and Intercultural Studies that allowed him to complete his doctorate in German Language and American Literature at Vanderbilt in 1965. His daughter was born two years later, and his wife was also still able to complete all coursework, language exams, and written exams for her doctorate at Vanderbilt while teaching full-time at Western.

The two worlds that Jim Wayne lived in as a child can easily be seen as reflected in his later life. He had one life and family at the University that was compatible with the aspirations of his father's side of his family. When he drove east into the mountains, his life became immersed in the Appalachian culture that his maternal relatives exemplified.

Miller's first book of poetry, *Copperhead Cane*, celebrated mountain farm life and appeared in 1965 before he completed his doctorate. In the same lecture cited earlier, Robert Morgan spoke of this book:

These poems shine as brightly as if they were written this morning. They do not reflect the fashions of 1965, but have a timeless, crafted quality. They have the authority of form and the authority of felt experience. They are authentic in detail and natural in speech.

Miller's second book, *The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same*, appeared in 1971. It is his most political collection and includes poetic celebrations of Eastern Kentucky natives who resisted strip mining for coal. In 1974, *Dialogue with a Dead Man* appeared. This tribute to his maternal grandfather was published by the University of Georgia Press, and included all of *Copperhead Cane*, along with newer poems.

*The Mountains Have Come Closer*, published by the Appalachian Consortium Press, collected his poetry until 1980 and included "The Brier Sermon," perhaps his most celebrated poem. Morgan notes that:

The poems here are among the best known and most loved in our region. No one has been able to better describe and enact the sense of loss and the paradoxes of identity in the mountains. The narratives, and dramas, the monologues and multiple voices, have captured for all time the ironies of our place in geography and history. Many lines are among the most quoted in Appalachian poetry.

In the 1980s Jim Wayne Miller published two small press collections, *Nostalgia for 70* and *Vein of Words*, the latter consisting of poems about writing poetry. In 1988 Gnomon Press published *Brier, His Book*, the culminating work of his lifetime. Shortly after his death, Gnomon published *The Brier Poems*. Robert Morgan reflected on this volume:

Jim Wayne's poems are witty, clear-eyed, dramatic and unsentimental. More than many people realized, he was often a very experimental poet, trying new things with voice and form. His poems are charged with a relish for dramatic improvisation. . . . At the same time he is a poet of informed political conscience and consciousness. Rereading his poems reminds us that he is not only a poet of the mountains, but of the planet.

Miller published five chapbooks in three different genres. One was a poetry chapbook. Of the many essays he published in various journals and periodicals, three were reprinted in chapbook form. His short-story chapbook, *His First, Best Country* became the basis for a play produced by the Kentucky Repertory Theatre and later for a novel of the same title. He also completed a book consisting of his translations of the work of the Austrian poet, Emil Lerperger.

Jim Wayne Miller actually was involved in many more works celebrating others than books he wrote himself. The most

comprehensive of these is the two-volume set entitled *Appalachia Inside Out*, that he co-edited with Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning, a collection of fiction and nonfiction intended to be an introductory text for both Appalachian studies and Appalachian Literature courses. He coedited with Geroge Ella Lyon *A Gathering at the Forks*, a collection of work by participants in the Hindman Workshop, and he edited another anthology of regional stories and poetry published for Alice Lloyd College, *I Have a Place*. In 1992, he co-edited with Cratis Williams and Loyal Jones, *Southern Mountain Speech*, published by the Berea College Press and bringing together an unprecedented triumvirate of Appalachian Studies pioneers. He also published two annotated bibliographies of Appalachian books.

Miller edited *The Wolfpen Poems*, a collection of the work of his friend, James Still, and he was involved in editing ten different reprints of books by James Still's Lincoln Memorial University classmate, Jesse Stuart.

Jim Wayne Miller's first novel was *Newfound*, published by Orchard books of New York City. It was followed by *His First, Best Country* published in 1993 by Gnomon Press.

Miller's dedication to promoting Appalachian Studies is evidenced by the fact that he was elected Chair of the Appalachian Studies Association in 1982, and his devotion to promoting literature is exemplified by his selection in 1986 as Poet Laureate of Kentucky.

At the end of his life, Jim Wayne Miller suffered from lung cancer, yet he persisted almost to the very end fishing, teaching, and learning. Just weeks before his death, pale and emaciated, he drove by himself to his last Appalachian Writers Conference at Hindman. He was at his office working on the Friday before he died on Sunday, August 18, 1996. Robert Morgan reflected:

Jim Wayne Miller has done more for Appalachian writing in our time than anyone else. As poet and fiction writer, critic and editor, anthologist, playwright and teacher, he has stimulated and presided over a generation of literary activity in the Southern mountains. It is astonishing how many lives Jim Wayne touched through his poetry and prose, through his readings and lectures.