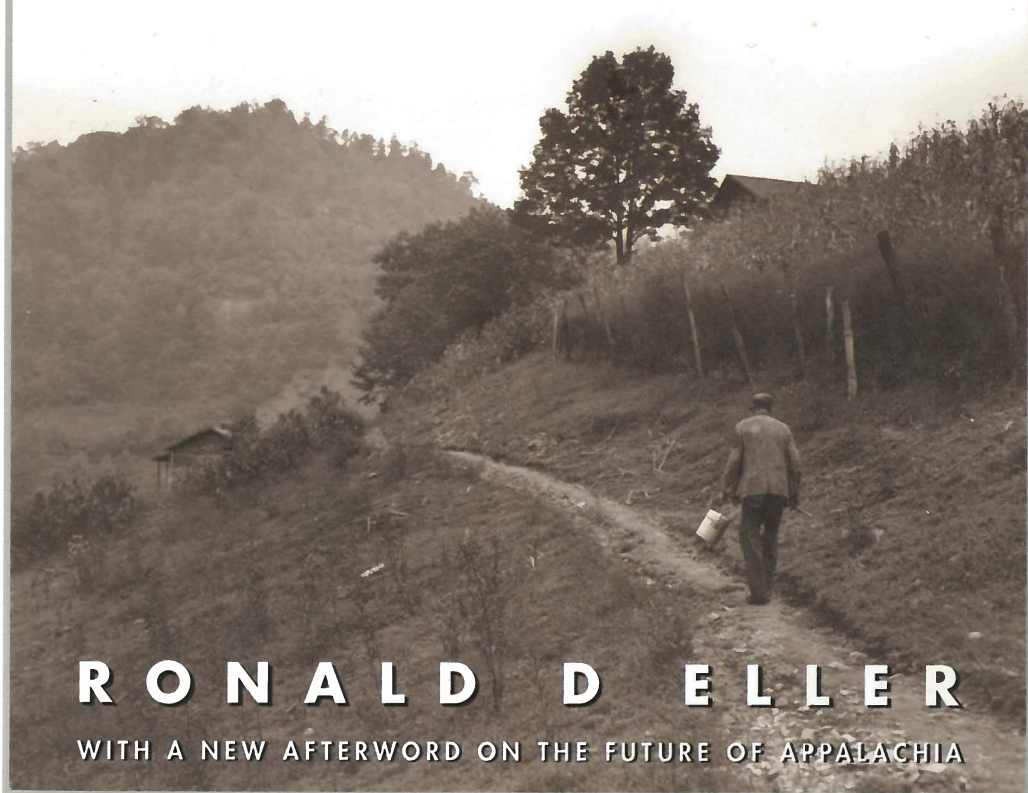


UNEVEN  
GROUND  
APPALACHIA  
SINCE 1945



RONALD D ELLER

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD ON THE FUTURE OF APPALACHIA

# INTRODUCTION

Americans have an enduring faith in the power of development to improve the quality of our lives. At least since the late nineteenth century, we have associated progress toward the attainment of a better society with measures of industrial production, urbanization, consumption, technology, and the adoption of modern education and cultural values. Early in the twentieth century, we assumed that movement along the road to the good life was best left to the engine of private enterprise, but after the Great Depression and World War II, government played a larger role in assuring economic growth and incorporating minorities into the new American dream. Areas such as Appalachia were deemed to be backward and underdeveloped because they lacked the statistical measures of progress, both material and cultural, that had become the benchmarks of success in a modern world. For policy makers of the 1950s and 1960s, convinced of the appropriateness of the American path to development, those backwater places needed to be energized and brought into the supposed mainstream.

Appalachia has long played an ironic role in the drama of American development. Discovered or, more accurately, created by urban journalists in the years following the Civil War, the idea of Appalachia provided a counterpoint to emerging definitions of progress at the turn of the twentieth century. Those writers who disliked modernity saw in the region a remnant of frontier life, the reflection of a simpler, less complicated time that ought to be preserved and protected. Those who found advancement in the growth of material production, consumption, and technology decried what they considered the isolation and backwardness of the place and sought to uplift the mountain people

through education and industrialization. The perceived economic and cultural deficiencies of Appalachia allowed entrepreneurs a free hand to tap the region's natural resources in the name of development, but by midcentury the dream of industrial prosperity had produced the opposite in the mountains. Persistent unemployment and poverty set Appalachia off as a social and economic problem area long before social critic Michael Harrington drew attention to the region as part of the "other America" in 1962.<sup>1</sup>

As the United States matured into a global economic power in the late twentieth century, the effort to spread the development faith at home and abroad once again focused the nation's attention on the region. The migration of millions of young whites from Appalachia and young blacks from the Deep South into the cities of the Midwest added to the congestion and poverty of urban ghettos, and the shocking scenes of rural blight captured by the media during John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential primary campaign in West Virginia contradicted popular notions of an affluent America. The rediscovery of Appalachia as a cultural and economic problem area was an embarrassment and a challenge to a generation confident of its ability to shape a better world. Attempting to eliminate the disparities between mainstream America and Appalachia, government made the region a domestic testing ground for strategies to promote economic growth, and social scientists used it as a laboratory for experimentation in human behavior modification.

Government and private programs launched during the 1960s eventually transformed the mountains, stirring both hope and resistance among mountain residents. The short-lived War on Poverty and the more lasting Appalachian Regional Commission fueled a new cultural identity in the region and spawned a multitude of new roads, schools, retail centers, and other symbols of the consumer society. Appalachia was swept up in another round of modernization that reshaped the physical landscape and permanently altered the way of life for most of the region's residents. Even so, the transformation begun by the War on Poverty failed to eliminate the perception of Appalachian otherness, and the new Appalachia that emerged from the special development programs continued to reflect the social inequalities and environmental exploitation that had burdened the region for de-

CADES. By the turn of the twenty-first century, growth and government-sponsored initiatives to promote change had altered the outward appearance of Appalachia, but development had done little to correct the structural problems of land abuse, political corruption, economic shortsightedness, and the loss of community and culture. Despite the rise and fall of national attention and resources, no other region within the United States has presented a greater challenge to policy makers or a greater test of modern notions of development. The idea of Appalachia survives in the popular mind, and the heart of the region continues to lag behind the rest of the country as an area of persistent economic and social distress.

Appalachia endures as a paradox in American society in part because it plays a critical role in the discourse of national identity but also because the region's struggle with modernity reflects a deeper American failure to define progress in the first place. For more than a century, Appalachia has provided a challenge to modern conceptions of the American dream. It has appeared as a place of cultural backwardness in a nation of progressive values, a region of poverty in an affluent society, and a rural landscape in an increasingly urban nation. We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not. It is the "other America" because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives. The notion of Appalachia as a separate place, a region set off from mainstream culture and history, has allowed us to distance ourselves from the uncomfortable dilemmas that the story of Appalachia raises about our own lives and about the larger society. However, Appalachia is more than just an intellectual idea. It is also a real place where public policies designed to achieve a healthy society, the objective of development itself, have played out with mixed results. As a venue for development, Appalachia provides a stage for the larger political debates over the meaning of progress, over who wins and who loses as a result of change, and over the role of government in assuring the good life.

I have spent much of the past four decades observing, participating in, and writing about the process of development in the mountains. My family has lived in the southern mountains since the 1790s, and we have witnessed many of the changes that have swept the region in the name of progress and modernization. We have survived as farmers,

coal miners, mill hands, and ministers, and we have fought the nation's wars and enriched the larger culture with our music. As a college student in West Virginia during the War on Poverty, I served as a part-time caseworker in child welfare. I was told by my professors and field supervisors that the problems of poverty in my community were the result of cultural deficiencies, antiquated values, and low expectations; my responsibility as an educated person was to serve as a role model for my less advantaged clients. Uncomfortable with those assumptions, I became a historian, teacher, and activist, determined not only to gain a better understanding of my land and my people but to translate that knowledge into the national conversation about Appalachia.

My first book, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: The Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, rejected the notion that the problems of the region were the product of a peculiar mountain culture and a different history and found instead that the region's distress was rooted deeply in the very process of private industrial development that had created modern America. As director of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center for sixteen years, I worked with local leaders, state policy makers, and national planners to transfer the lessons of that development history into public policy affecting the region. Too often, however, I found not only that research and experience were ignored in the drama of political decision making (a fact that should come as no surprise to historians) but that the assumptions about change that guided policy toward Appalachia were based on a limited range of alternatives and visions of the good life. Appalachia was not different from the rest of America; it was in fact a mirror of what the nation was becoming. To challenge those assumptions was in some circles almost un-American.

This book therefore examines the politics of development in Appalachia since 1945 with an eye toward exploring the idea of progress as it has evolved in modern America itself. The story of Appalachia's struggle to overcome poverty, to live in harmony with the land, and to respect the diversity of cultures and the value of community is an American story. Since World War II, during my lifetime, Appalachia has undergone dramatic change. The long lines of unemployed men at government commodity distribution centers have given way to lines of commuters in Wal-Mart superstores acquiring the latest consumer

products of a world economy. The dilapidated schools, poor housing, and inadequate health care that led my parents to briefly leave the mountains in the 1950s for a better life in northern cities have been replaced by modern facilities and services that provide access to the latest technology and knowledge within fifty miles of every mountain resident. Superhighways make it easier to get into and out of the region, and bustling suburban centers have emerged throughout the mountains, looking much like their retail-based counterparts elsewhere in America. Yet, as in the nation as a whole, these changes have come at a tremendous cost to the environment, at the displacement of millions of rural residents, and at the loss of traditional values and cultures. The diversity that is modern Appalachia belies a growing gap between the rich and the poor, and it ignores the continuing sacrifice of Appalachian resources and people for the comfort and prosperity of the rest of the nation.

Much of the change that has come to Appalachia is the result of well-intentioned government planning to promote growth and assimilation. Programs such as the War on Poverty and the Appalachian Regional Development Act reflect broadly held attitudes about progress within and outside the region, attitudes that are grounded in the received assumptions about development that have limited the dialogue and potential for alternative paths and outcomes. Too often, for example, we have mistaken growth for development, change for progress. Indeed, growth has become central to the American idea of development. Attainment of the good life, we assume, is dependent upon the continued expansion of markets, transportation and communication networks, mass culture, urban centers, and consumer demand. Economic growth may indeed generate employment opportunities, but if those jobs provide low wages and few health benefits, they can reinforce conditions of dependence and powerlessness. New highways may increase commerce and access to services for some communities, but other communities, bypassed by the transportation improvements, can suffer displacement and decline. Expansion of mining and other extractive industries may produce short-term employment but, if unregulated, can leave environmental damage that may threaten the sustainability of communities and ecosystems for generations to come. Investments in some areas of the economy can benefit a small number

of individuals or places at the expense of others, and lifestyle enhancements for a few people may cause hardship and loss of meaning for other people.

Since World War II, moreover, we have assumed that the scientific management of growth could achieve progress in the mountains without requiring structural change in the distribution of wealth, the ownership and use of the land, or the control of the political system. Poverty could be eliminated by changing individual behavior and by tying people more directly to the market rather than confronting existing social and economic inequalities. This faith in the ability of technology and education to lift all boats has produced public institutions in Appalachia that look much like those in the rest of the nation, but those institutions continue to reflect regional disparities in social capital and political power. Since the goal of growth was a society that mirrored suburban, consumer America, development strategies in Appalachia further fragmented mountain society through the centralization of public services and retail facilities, the creation of class-segregated communities, and the generation of material symbols of individual success. The modernization of the mountains required the further integration of the region into the global marketplace and the subsequent weakening of local, producer-based economies. Although some aspects of local cultures were packaged and commodified for export, local community ties gave way to new, market-oriented identities, and in some places local residents themselves were displaced by newcomers tied to the land only by aesthetic and consumer values.

The mixed legacy of growth in Appalachia has also left its mark on the land and on human connections to the land. As a result of the rapid expansion of modern technologies after World War II, difficult terrain could be breached to promote commerce with the larger world. Streams could be relocated, rivers dammed, and hillsides developed for housing, recreation, and business use. Most of all, entire mountains and ranges of mountains could be leveled to extract their mineral resources and to create a landscape more suitable for manufacturing and retail expansion. Appalachian residents had always used the land for survival, and their knowledge of and intimacy with the land were based upon their use of it. Although some mountain residents may have developed a spiritual relationship to the land and an appreciation

for the natural environment, their connection with the place was more often linked to family and community ties rather than recognition of the relationship between their way of life and the landscape around them. Like other Americans, most Appalachians were quick to turn to more convenient lifestyles when the products of a modern economy expanded their choices. The growth-based economy, however, forever altered the landscape itself and physically separated families from the old intimacy with the land that had provided sustenance and meaning to life. Having failed to learn the environmental lessons of resource overdevelopment at the turn of the twentieth century, we continued to see the mountains (just as we saw mountain culture) as a barrier to progress, something to be overcome and its resources tapped in the name of growth.

The tendency to blame the land, environment, and culture of the mountains for the problems of Appalachia obscures our ability to understand the complexity of political and economic struggles within the region and diminishes our national dialogue on the meaning of progress and the most appropriate path to development. Many popular images continue to set off Appalachia against the rest of America. In doing so, they deny the presence of class and ideological differences that divide Appalachian communities. Many public policies are still based on the naive assumptions that poverty can be seriously addressed without structural change, that growth is good for everyone, that urban lifestyles and institutions are to be emulated, and that local and regional markets are not important in a global economy. Such assumptions weaken the democratic conversation about the goal of government and the quality of our lives. Faith in the ability of growth-based development alone to eliminate poverty, moreover, effectively disfranchises poorer people and rural people and further displaces our collective responsibilities for the land and for each other onto the vagaries of the market and onto the best intentions of bureaucrats. The development process is a value-laden political act, complete with winners and losers. As such, it necessitates public debate, challenging the way we understand progress and the way we see ourselves.

Much of the story of Appalachia describes the exploitation of the region at the hands of outside economic interests. Considerable research since the 1960s has documented the extent of absentee land-

## UNEVEN GROUND

ownership and corporate control of the Appalachian economy, but the development faith is not just something that has been imposed on the mountains from outside. As the pages that follow reveal, leaders from within Appalachia were among the first to call for government intervention programs to promote development and reduce poverty. Mountain residents themselves have been among the strongest advocates of growth, and they have engaged in some of the most callous exploitation of the land and of their fellow citizens that has befallen the region. If Appalachia's struggle with development has been uneven and has failed to meet our expectations and dreams, it is because Appalachia's problems are not those of Appalachia alone. They will not be solved in isolation from the dilemmas facing the rest of modern society. For that reason, we are all engaged in the struggle to define the good life in the mountains. We are all Appalachians.