

Appalachia

Volume 63
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2012: The Great
Eastern Alpine Zone*

Article 10

2012

The Beat Generation in the Mountains: After the Famous San Francisco Reading, Fire Lookouts Became Literary Sites

Ron Dart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dart, Ron (2012) "The Beat Generation in the Mountains: After the Famous San Francisco Reading, Fire Lookouts Became Literary Sites," *Appalachia*: Vol. 63: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol63/iss1/10>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

The Beat Generation in the Mountains

*After the famous San Francisco reading,
fire lookouts became literary sites*

Ron Dart



A braid of circumstances ties the Beat Generation to the North Cascades. In the early 1950s, a weary America turned its attention to getting ahead after enduring the Depression and WWII—and in that era of the man in the gray flannel suit, a group of literary rebels hit the road and the trail. While the Lost Generation found its refuge and inspiration in Paris, the Beats found their safe harbour in the North Cascades as well as in San Francisco's North Beach.

—James Martin, *North Cascades Crest*:

Notes and Images from *America's Alps* (Sasquatch Books, 1999)

ON OCTOBER 7, 1955, THE POET KENNETH REXROTH ORCHESTRATED the most famous Beat Generation poetry reading in history, one that joined Columbia-educated, Greenwich Village Beat writers—Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac—with the ecologically minded “mountain Beats” of the West—Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder—at San Francisco's Six Gallery. That night Ginsberg read his poem “Howl” for the first time in public. But for Kerouac, Whalen, and Snyder, a Western landscape far from that gallery touched their work deeply.

Snyder and Whalen had lived in fire lookouts on Sauk, Sourdough, and Crater mountains in the North Cascades just a few years before, and Kerouac spent his first summer in the range the summer after the Six Gallery reading, when he worked as a lookout on Desolation Peak. Kerouac's experience in that job so lingered in his mind that he wrote about it in four of his books. Ginsberg also visited the North Cascades, making two trips with Snyder in 1956 and 1965.

These are the facts of the Beats' journeys to the ancient rock spires and ice fields of the North Cascades. There is no doubt that they influenced the emerging literary and political vision of this new generation of American writers. The lookout sites, perched high on rock rims, knobs, and citadels of ages, became literary sites to develop spiritual and cultural insights. There, the Beat writers retreated to reclaim more meditative lives. They felt that the North Cascades were like the mountains in China where their Chinese mountain sage, Han-Shan, spent his meditative days.

Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982) was the elder and dean of the West Coast mountain Beats. He fondly tells the tale of his North Cascade days in his

This lonely site in the North Cascades inspired four of Jack Kerouac's books. KEVIN MILLER

accessible autobiography, *An Autobiographical Novel* (Doubleday, 1966). Rexroth had traveled across much of the United States in 1924, that summer when he helped build a shelter in the Cascades, hiked, opened trails with saw and ax, and had many an adventure. His rambles included a climb of Glacier Peak, west of Lake Chelan, and an amble up the Skagit Valley to Canada. His mountain enthusiasm could not be missed. “I got back probably the happiest boy who ever lived.” And he recalled, “I tried to arrange my itinerary so that I’d have a peak to climb every evening after work”. The sights he took in from the precarious perch where he joined the group building McGregor Lookout were worthy of the poet’s soul and eye.

Although Rexroth later parted ways with the Beats, he was their mentor and patriarch and a pioneer in the West Coast literary movements from the 1930s to the 1950s. He wove together, on a delicate tapestry, the threads of Eastern and Western mysticism, poetry, politics, ecological awareness, and even publishing.

His influence on the younger Snyder was very clear. Snyder lived as a lookout in the North Cascades at Crater Mountain in 1952 and on Sourdough Mountain in 1953, but the “high summer of the great fear” dominated 1954. Joseph McCarthy was baiting “Reds,” and Snyder’s leftist and anarchist affinities ran counter to McCarthy’s ideological commitments. Snyder could not get a job in the North Cascades because some thought he might be a national security threat. Snyder had more than demonstrated his competence in the mountains as a lookout in 1952 and 1953, but other factors were at work in keeping him from high mountain lookout life.

Snyder, like Rexroth, was in the midst of synthesizing a new vision for post–World War II America: poetry, politics, Buddhism, ecological attentiveness, and mountain metaphors. The 1950s were the years when the Beats were quietly putting down roots that would give birth, in the 1960s, to the counterculture. In the North Cascades, the silent and listening years formed and forged their souls. It is almost impossible to miss the centrality of mountains in Snyder’s prose, poetry, and translations. The publication of Snyder classics from the 1950s such as *Cold Mountain Poems* (A. Schiller, 1968), *Riprap* (Origin Press, 1959), and *Myths and Texts* (New Directions, 1978) signaled a literary way that was grounded in mountains and the transformative myth of mountains.

Questioning a Frantic Life

I attended a reading of Snyder's *Danger on Peaks* (Shoemaker & Hoard) in 2004 in the North Cascades area, and almost 1,000 people turned out for the evening. In fact, many had to be turned away. I was quite fortunate at the reading to get a signed copy of *Danger on Peaks* and a photograph taken with Snyder. The theme of mountains, though, was ever present in *Danger on Peaks* as it was in such publications as *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Counterpoint, 1997), *Look Out: A Selection of Writings* (New Directions, 2002), and the hefty tome, *The Gary Snyder Reader* (Counterpoint, 1999). Snyder, of course, has traveled, in both a literal and literary sense, beyond the North Cascades, but, again and again, there is a circling back to the glacier-thick rock sentinels of the Cascades.

Snyder met Philip Whalen (1923–2002) in 1952. Whalen was never as active in the mountains as Snyder or Rexroth, but Whalen spent a few years there. He lived as a lookout at Sauk Mountain in the North Cascades from 1953 to 1955. I have been to Sauk many times, and the old lookout is no longer visible. It's an easy perch to reach, and from this pleasant spot Whalen began to synthesize his interest in poetry, Zen Buddhism, mountain metaphors, and an ecological sensibility. Life in the lookouts for Snyder and Whalen was about looking out for changes in American society. Distance from the valley was needed for better seeing, and Whalen and Snyder saw much in the fast-moving and driven ethos of the time. Did they want such a frantic existence? The North Cascade Beats were very much charting a new path worthy of a life trek in the 1950s. *Continuous Flame: A Tribute to Philip Whalen* (Fish Drum, 2004) is a fine eulogy to Whalen's role in pointing the way to a spirituality that is deeply meditative and poetically probing.

Most know Jack Kerouac (1922–1969) as the “king of the Beats.” The publication of *On the Road* (Viking) in 1956 drove the shy and introverted Kerouac to the center of literary life in the 1950s. Kerouac was an East Coast urban boy, but in 1955, he met Rexroth, Snyder, Whalen, and many others at the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco. Kerouac, like Rexroth, Snyder, and Whalen, was on a conscious spiritual and literary search, and he found part of his answer in the mountains. Kerouac was hired as a lookout at Desolation Peak in the North Cascades in the summer of 1956. He had high hopes of what the experience of more than two months alone on a rock knoll would do for him on his journey. Kerouac, like Rexroth, had pronounced Roman Catholic sympathies and leanings, but both men were also interested in the Eastern traditions and Buddhism. Both men were quite aware of the work of



Ron Dart on the steps of the Desolation Peak fire lookout cabin where Jack Kerouac was stationed in 1956. KEVIN MILLER

Thomas Merton, and the way, as a Christian monk, Merton used the image of mountains as a dominant metaphor in his journey. (Snyder and Whalen, conversely, tended to be much less interested in the relationship between West and East.)

Kerouac's Lonely Time on Desolation

Kerouac's lengthy sojourn as a lookout on Desolation Peak had a profound impact on his life. Desolation Peak is on the north end of Ross Lake just as Snyder's Sourdough lookout is on the south end of Ross Lake. The sheer aloneness as a lookout combined with the silence and rock turrets in all directions does work its way into the inner life. Kerouac wrote poignantly and graphically about his time on Desolation in four books: *Dharma Bums* (Viking, 1958), *Lonesome Traveler* (Grove Press, 1960), *Desolation Angels* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), and *Book of Blues* (Penguin, 1995). Snyder is immortalized in *Dharma Bums* as Japhy Ryder just as Mount Hozomeen (whose split knife edge broods over the North Cascades and gazes down on Desolation Peak) is never far from Kerouac's imagination and writing. Kerouac lacked the inner discipline of Rexroth, Snyder, and Whalen, and this partially explains his short life and tragic death, but there can be no doubt

that the North Cascades touched a deep chord within him that would not be still or silent. The opening line of *Desolation Angels*, which takes up more than a page, is descriptively apt and insightful:

Those afternoons, those lazy afternoons, when I used to sit, or lie down, on Desolation Peak, sometimes on the alpine grass, hundreds of miles of snow covered rock all around, looming Mount Hozomeen on my north, vast snowy Jack to the south, the enchanted picture of the lake below to the west and the snowy hump of Mt. Baker beyond, and to the east the rilled and ridged monstrosities humping to the Cascade Ridge . . . stark naked rock, pinnacles and thousand feet high protruding from hunch muscles another thousand feet high protruding from immense timbered shoulders.

I was fortunate to climb the fang-like upper peaks of Hozomeen in 1975, and I have led many a trip to Kerouac's lookout shrine on Desolation Peak. Kerouac brought to a close the final few lines in Chapter 22 of *The Dharma Bums* with this celebration of Hozomeen:

Hozomeen, Hozomeen, the most beautiful mountain I ever seen, and the most beautiful as soon as I got to know it and saw the Northern Lights behind it reflecting all the ice of the North Pole from the other side of the world.

Sadly so, Kerouac's descent from the upper knoll and mountain ridge of Desolation Peak to the demands of valley wreaked havoc with his soul. The tragic descent is well recounted in *Desolation Angels*.

The North Cascades—mysterious or even obscure to many who read the Beats—played an essential role in the emerging Beat generation. Rexroth, Snyder, Whalen, and Kerouac were all indebted, for different reasons, to the white-clad summits, rocky gorges, and guardians of ages past. The merging of Eastern and Western spirituality, poetry, prose and politics, ecological awareness, and the mountain as a mystical metaphor, happened to the Beats in the North Cascades in the 1950s.

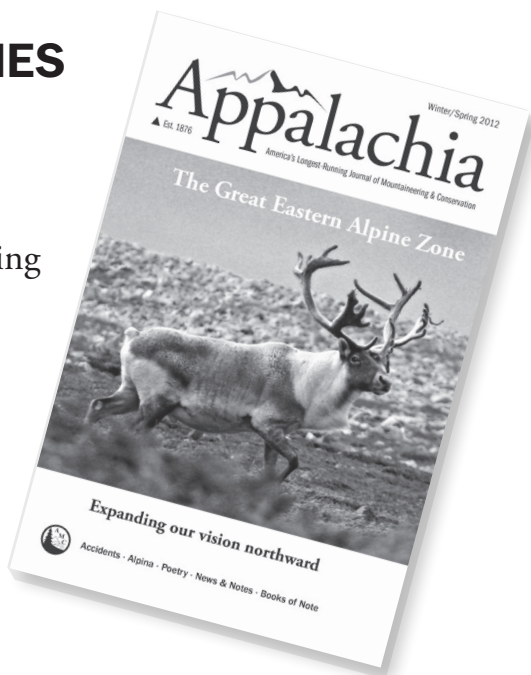
RON DART lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia, in the Canadian Cascade Mountains, just over the border from where the Beats spent time in the North Cascades. He has taught in the Department of Political Science/Philosophy/Religious Studies at University of the Fraser Valley since 1990.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of June 2022. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit outdoors.org.