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Doing Time in New Jersey

*A Thoreau scholar in Princeton finds
comfort in the nascent Appalachians*

Will Howarth



“What territory do you cover?”

“A place called New Jersey. And I would like to be transferred.”

—*Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, 1941 film

I ARRIVED IN 1966—AND AM STILL AWAITING TRANSFER. NEW JERSEY is an odd state: raucous, crowded, not given to reflection. Jersey folk talk tough and keep tenderness or friendliness for family and friends. When I strike up conversations, in Midwest style, the locals are surprised, gratified by the novelty, and often eager to open up. The landscape here is much the same: Its ugly surface is layered and subtle, if you know how to look. Being a peninsula, almost an island, makes the state insular, particular. I’ve spent most of my life here, on guarded terms, for New Jersey is not an easy place to love. In the last two years, I’ve escaped it often. My passport stamps are from Portugal, Spain, France, England, Amsterdam, Tanzania, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, San Francisco—and Newark, when I returned home.

Benjamin Franklin called this crowded little state “a barrel tapped at both ends,” and he had the right analogy. New Jersey also has twin axes, an eastern slurb along Interstate 95, feeding commuters to New York or Philadelphia, and a western greenbelt from Shore and Pines to the Highlands of the upper Delaware River. Contrasts abound, from urban wastelands to the Appalachian Trail, Ellis Island to the Menlo labs of Thomas Edison. New Jersey is the most densely populated state and the most tainted; more than 23,000 properties are labeled brownfields, many sodden with toxic waste.

Ancient New Jersey emerged in the Appalachian orogeny, rising and breaking off from North Africa. During the late Ice Ages, glaciers slowly advanced and retreated, carving and filling the rivers and wetlands that thread the land. For three millennia, native people lived here, chiefly the Leni Lenape, who migrated from sea to mountains following seasonal game. Then came the Dutch and Swedes, setting deep roots five centuries ago. Streams here are called runs and kills, and old families—Opdyke, Cowenhoven, Cortelyou—manage farms along county highways.

The monument at High Point, one of the author’s favorite peaks. (Another, Mount Lucas, is so low that it’s hard to photograph.) NJHIKING.COM

After the English civil war, nobles loyal to the Crown won a patent to the land between the Hudson and Delaware rivers. The British arrived in numbers, armed and eager to take over. One founder, George Carteret, came from Jersey, the largest English Channel island. He erased New Netherland and New Sweden from the map, naming his colony New Jersey. Despite these royalist origins, New Jersey joined the Revolution early, signing its own constitution on July 2, 1776. After battling from Trenton to Morristown, New Jersey became the third state by ratifying the U.S. Constitution on December 18, 1787.

Trenton today is a fading state capital. Governors don't live there, the town struggles against blight, yet an old bridge sign boasts, "Trenton Makes/ The World Takes." Once that was so: Waterfalls on the Delaware powered saw and grist mills, and in time, the region made steel, wire, carpet, and pottery, key products of the Industrial Revolution.

Eleven miles and a universe away, my hometown of Princeton is two villages, an inner borough of two square miles and an outer township of ten, forming a hole and doughnut. Since 1703, the two municipalities have discussed but never formed a single town. Another invisible boundary divides west from east: The west is a warren of stockbroker estates and McMansions, the east has homes where neighbors mow lawns and wash cars. (University deans live west, the faculty, east.)

Despite a 1990s bloom of malls and office parks, Princeton is still a four-stoplight, two-street town. The main drag is Nassau Street, the last of its many incarnations. First it was a forest track, a Lenni Lenape trail from Atlantic-shore fish camps to winter longhouses in the Ramapo hills. Then a colonial road, the main coach route between New England and the Tidewater. When I came to town, some signs still read "The King's Highway."

Nassau Street also marks the boundary between glacial outwash plain and the first line of Appalachians west of the Jersey shore. The change is easy to see. At the meeting of Prospect Avenue and Washington Road, the land slopes down, down toward the Jersey shore, 40 miles east. A sandy plain begins at the D&R Canal, once a principal freight artery between New York and Philadelphia. The old canal towpath is a mule track that runs 44 miles across New Jersey, linking the Delaware and Raritan rivers.

The towpath is now a greenway, the longest, slimmest state park in the nation. Many an hour I've spent on that trail, running, jogging, or walking. In my life, I have traveled widely yet held one job and lived in one town. Walking the canal now, I go with ghosts: friends gone, places altered. But



A biker rests on a journey from Princeton to Millstone on the D&R Canal towpath, a 44-mile-long former freight artery. MICHAEL SEAN GALLAGHER

from almost anywhere, I can look up and see the nascent Appalachians, a handsome wooded ridge rising over water tower and shopping center, library and lab. The mountains of Princeton are a constant comfort.

And an illusion. When George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Paine rode up Nassau Street to the meetings of Congress, they knew a far different Princeton Ridge. The second-growth forest of ash and tulip tree that now blurs its heights was apple orchard then, and cleared field for a hundred years thereafter. In the humid summer of 1783, George and Martha Washington rented a pleasant upland house, three miles from town. Today the hill where they lived has vanished, dynamited to gravel for its native diabase, or traprock. To walk where they lived, you must tread on air.

But stand at the north edge of campus, and two miles away the next large outcropping is mighty Mount Lucas (all 305 feet), intact though under constant attack from developers. Only a handful of residents live up there in a district still called Herrontown, so named for the wagonloads of sea herring hauled in between Civil War and Depression by Irish farmers hoping to sweeten a thin, stony soil.

Today that land is 300 acres of public open space, home to even more deer, fox, turkey, coon, coyote, and bear than in 1776. (One Lenape clan sign was Turkey, so we treat those visitors well.) Our house diary charts a natural inventory: at last count, more than 80 species of mammals, birds, and reptiles have passed our back door. And yet we live 3 miles from Nassau Street, and less than 40 from Manhattan.

IN THIS SETTING, I'VE SPENT A CAREER TEASING OUT CONNECTIONS between nature and culture, that great American theme. No other nation acquired so much open land nor wrecked it so swiftly. I began my studies with Henry David Thoreau, our first environmental writer, and pursuit of him led to years of living and traveling in New England, from his home village of Concord, Massachusetts, to the far reaches of northern Maine. He lived within view of Appalachian ranges, and his romantic idealism often drew him to higher ground. I came to see him as a literary backpacker, in love with wood smoke and long trails, where he charted the ecology of altitude. The idea and reality of elevation haunts all of his writings, many of them about mountain climbs: Wachusett, Greylock, Monadnock, Washington, Tuckerman Ravine. And, of course, Katahdin, where burned-over slopes yielded the epiphany that marks his transformation from outdoorsman and naturalist to environmental prophet.

Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in Nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, —rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?¹

A philosopher-naturalist in the era that created modern earth science, Thoreau learned geology and evolutionary biology from the writings of Charles Lyell, Louis Agassiz, and Charles Darwin, who exposed a vision of the earth's deep time, millions of years beyond Bible stories. Of the six books I wrote or edited on Thoreau, most deal with his struggle to find a voice and form for natural history. He drew his models from two sources, space and time, the arc of a journey and a calendar year. The shapes came to him from writing a journal for 25 years, some two million words gathered on travels in Concord and elsewhere: Canada, Cape Cod, Maine, Minnesota, and once

¹ From Thoreau's essay, "Ktaadn" (1864), later published in *The Maine Woods* (1848) as the first chapter.

south to Philadelphia. He passed through central New Jersey, but found there no mysteries:

Left at 7:30 am for New York, by boat to Tacony and rail via Bristol, Trenton, Princeton (near by), New Brunswick, Rahway, Newark, etc. Uninteresting, except the boat.²

Watching Thoreau learn the language of his fields led me to work on other nature writers, from the travels of William Bartram, along the Appalachians to Georgia and Florida, to the high Sierra peaks of Clarence King, a geologist and born raconteur. John McPhee, a *New Yorker* writer from Princeton, became a friend who encouraged me to write literary nonfiction. I edited a collection of his early writings and years later wrote an essay assessing his long and still thriving career. He was kind to dedicate one book to me, *In Suspect Terrain*, devoted to Appalachian geology. On my own I wrote stories and reviews for periodicals, chiefly published by the National Geographic Society.

Here, too, Appalachia came to my aid: I wrote literary profiles of its exiled children, from Willa Cather, Virginia-born, to John Steinbeck's Okie diasporas. I also led a double life, teaching at Princeton, then hopping planes to far-off journeys. One crammed weekend, I rafted rivers and rappelled cliffs in Idaho, then flew home to lecture on Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. Some colleagues criticized my bent for practical fieldwork, though one scientist did note that it was appropriate for literary study because the rocks of Appalachia and Britain are geological twins, pulled apart by plate tectonics.

Only once did I doubt my urge to travel in the footsteps of American authors: In northern Maine, not far from where Thoreau also had trouble, my party destroyed its two canoes in a stretch of heavy rapids. I remember standing in icy water, on lacerated feet, trying to calculate the miles to safety—and silently asking why I was not on the trail of Henry James.

But as I created and taught courses on environmental history, nature and travel writing, and evolutionary thought, I always tried to pry students away from the classroom to go to the ground, whether in parks around Princeton or up in Warren County, for walks on the AT. Seated on a rock face

² From Thoreau's journal, October 24–25, 1853.

high above the Delaware Water Gap, undergraduate hikers would murmur, *No way, this can't be New Jersey.*

For me, American and environmental studies are not parallel but coequal fields. Many great American authors took their ideas and themes from Appalachia's intractable problems, Appalachia's irrepressible survival instincts, Appalachia's heartrending beauty. Beside Thoreau, with his absorption in mountain gloom and glory, there stands Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby-Dick* while farming in the Berkshire Hills. On his staircase, he had a large round window, and he wrote that its view of snow-drifted land, below the great curving brow of Saddleback Mountain, recalled his days at sea in the company of whales. Nonfiction and memoir can be no less revealing: Thomas Jefferson wrote his only full-length book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in 1781 to 1783 to refute the European belief that natural forms degenerated in the New World. On the contrary, Jefferson verified, they thrive and multiply, a virtue he linked to their landscapes, Virginia's being the finest of all. In Chapter 4, "Mountains," he presents, with the fine-grained affection of a native son, a highly detailed account of how Virginia mountains and valleys form "the spine of the country" between the Atlantic, Mississippi, and Saint Lawrence waters.

In *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford University Press, 1989), historian David Hackett Fisher argues that distinct waves of settlement created America: New England's Puritan strain, the Cavaliers of Southern colonies, and the sober, practical Quakers of the Mid-Atlantic. But the final, most challenging assimilation lay in the cove-and-hollow borderlands and backcountry of Appalachia, whose settlement befell Scots-Irish and Highland refugees, uprooted by English conquest and eviction. Their ambivalence about the rule of law, like their lust for land (the hillier the better), inspires some of the greatest American narratives of the last century. For James Agee of Tennessee, like William Faulkner of Mississippi, the Appalachians supply a mythic ground of American struggle and despair, where Celtic segregations, Indian removals, and African slavery doom the mountain as well as the plantation South. Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and John Updike all grew up in the hills of Pennsylvania, and they absorb the same self-sufficient codes, the same taste for spiritual darkness. Harry Caudill catches it too, in his mordant account of coal country, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s (Little, Brown, 1962). So does Dillard's memoir of the Virginia mountains,

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), half vision, all rhapsody.

Earlier I joked about seeking a transfer from New Jersey. My life here has been a semi-exile, fueled by nostalgia. I grew up in Minnesota and Illinois, where the only hills stood in local parks. On a train trip east, I first saw the Appalachians, big-shouldered peaks that rose against the sky like breaching whales. In graduate school in Virginia, I lived close to the Appalachian Trail. Then came Princeton, where I mostly knew the worlds of town and gown, the hour drive between home and Newark Airport; some places at the Jersey shore, like Spring Lake or Harvey Cedars; and the Delaware Water Gap, where I saw bears feeding in a tamarack swamp. And then Princeton's finest approach, the lovely Hopewell Valley along Route 518, a reach of open, rolling farmland spared by citizen action from not one but two planning disasters: a power plant on the Delaware, and the unbuilt stretch of I-95. I am lucky to have known them all, and also my three favorite peaks: High Point, at the borders of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York; Bald Pate, on the Delaware River near Trenton; and Mount Lucas, beside Herrontown Road in Princeton.

Appalachian New Jersey has been my home, or at least my roosting-place, since Lyndon Johnson was in office. For nearly as long, Appalachian heritage has been a cultural touchstone for me as editor and journalist. I thought we were quit, the mountains and I. But after retiring from full-time teaching in 2008, I joined Anne Matthews, a distinguished writer of literary nonfiction, to work on fiction and films. Our first novel, *Deep Creek*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), is set in the remote backcountry of Idaho and Oregon, along the wild Snake River, and depicts a real-life event, the notorious 1887 massacre of more than 30 Chinese gold miners. The killers are caught, tried, and acquitted; our book seeks to answer how and why. Despite its Northwest setting, old lands and themes are still in play. Our hero is a Yankee from New England, very fond of Emerson; his archenemy a charming and violent rebel. From Appalachia, of course.

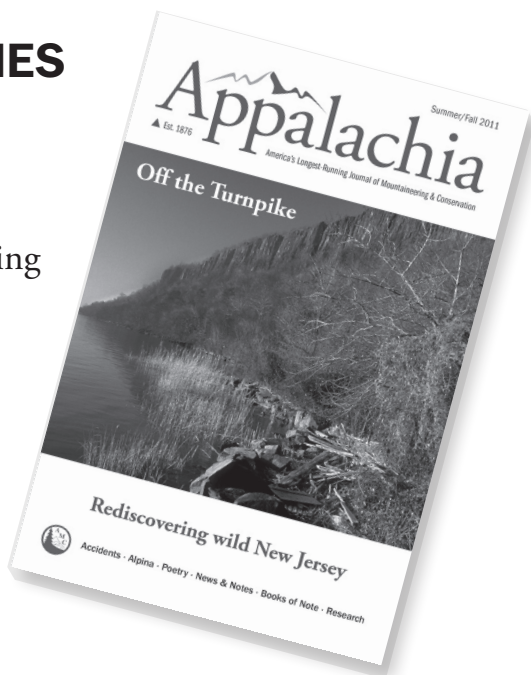
WILL HOWARTH is professor emeritus at Princeton University, where he has taught literature, history, and environmental studies for more than 40 years. Under his own name, he has written or edited thirteen books, including *The John McPhee Reader*, *Walking With Thoreau*, *The Book of Concord*, and *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*. As Dana Hand, he collaborates on fiction and film with Anne Matthews.

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