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Best known as the author of two books, Camp­ing and Woodcraft (Great Smoky Mountains Association, [1906] 2011) and Our Southern Highlanders, (Great Smoky Mountains Association, [1913] 2012). Horace Kephart has remained an enigmatic figure, even as his two major works retain their status as classics of their respective genres more than a century after their publication. Many may be familiar with the almost legendary tale of the prominent librarian who, following a breakdown, retreats to the Southern mountains where he lives out the final 3 decades of his life. However, the details of his life, and much of his literary output, have remained obscure. Two new volumes, a biography and an edited volume of writing about and by Kephart, give us a more complete understanding of the elusive writer.

Until recently, the most reliable source of biographical information on Kephart was George Ellison’s introduction to the 1976 edition of Our Southern Highlanders. The new biography, co-authored by Ellison and Janet McCue, is as expansive as Ellison’s earlier work was succinct, sorting through a massive amount of evidence to piece together a more complete portrait of the man. While acknowledging critiques of Kephart’s work, the biography aims to be neither critical nor speculative. However, it is deeply contextual, leading the reader through various side-trips, including an exploration of prostitution in Washington, DC, and a lovely description of all-male dances in western mining camps.

Ellison and McCue demonstrate that while Kephart’s mental illness radically altered his professional and family life, his interests in pioneer lifeways, camping, and firearms long pre-dated the events that led him to flee the civilization of St. Louis society to the “back of beyond” of the Western North Carolina mountains. Much of Kephart’s literary success came after his retreat to the wilderness, and ultimately, he achieved status as a public figure, especially in his championing of the creation of a new national park in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Ellison and McCue never fully resolve the riddle of Kephart’s personality, at one point simply concluding that the man was “both a genius and a train wreck” (p. 203). While they uncover an admirable amount of detail on Kephart’s life, the nature of his relationship with his wife Laura remains largely a mystery. The Kepharts chose to destroy their personal correspondence with each other, so the biographers cannot offer an easy understanding of why Laura remained loyal even as she was left to support six children on her own, or why family life became anathema to Horace.

While the reluctance to speculate too much on the Kepharts’ relationship is understandable, the authors could have pressed harder in their exploration of Horace Kephart’s role in the creation of the national park. The park movement made some strange bedfellows, joining the aims of individuals, such as Kephart, who were passionate about wilderness, with those whose primary aim was economic development, such as the chambers of commerce and the “good roads” movement. Although Kephart willingly repeated the arguments of the economic benefits of the park, privately, he admitted that when good roads arrived, he would once again need to flee. While the authors note this conflict, they say little of the internal dissonance Kephart must have had to resolve in supporting the land condemnations. Kephart the ardent conservationist clearly won out over Kephart the ethnographer. More than 1,200 families lost their homes in the park removals, a number of whom Kephart must have known personally. However, if he felt any regrets over the forced removal through eminent domain or compassion for these “Southern highlanders” whose
culture he made a career of documenting, his public and private writings do not reflect this, and his biographers generally avoid any discussion of the complexities of this aspect of the park's creation.

Kephart never did have the chance to flee the encroaching civilization, because he died in a car accident in 1931. The sorry state of his estate left it unlikely that his library and papers would be preserved intact. However, as Ellison and McCue document, the efforts of a few individuals led to their preservation, and ultimately to their donation to Western Carolina University (WCU). Subsequently, members of the Kephart family donated materials to the collection, providing a more intimate view of the private man. Longtime WCU archivist George Frizzell and English professor Mae Miller Claxton have now added to our growing understanding of Kephart, with their massive edited volume Horace Kephart: Writings. While there are considerable overlaps, especially as Ellison and McCue included much verbatim primary source material in their biography, the books work well in tandem.

Horace Kephart: Writings is divided into nine thematic sections, each preceded by introductions by different Kephart experts. Ellison and McCue provide the introduction to the first chapter, “Biography.” The second chapter, “Family and Friends,” introduced by Frizzell and Kephart’s great-granddaughter Libby Kephart Hargrave, contains some of the most compelling materials, including Kephart’s poignant comparison of himself to Rip Van Winkle when he returns to Ithaca, New York, in 1908 to make one final, and unsuccessful, attempt to rejoin his family and domestic life (pp. 104–6). Other chapters include much of Kephart’s journalistic writing, displaying a self-effacing, humorous style, which contrasts to some of the private writings of this lost and suffering man.

Each of the chapter introductions offers a slightly different take on Kephart’s life and contribution. Claxton offers broad historical contexts to the chapters on camping and woodcraft, Kephart’s fiction, and scouting, while Frizzell demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the breadth of Kephart’s work in the chapter on Southern Appalachian culture. More critical introductions are offered by Jim Casada in his chapter on guns, and Andrew Denson in the chapters on the Cherokee and on the creation of the national park and the Appalachian Trail. Casada touches on some of the harsher criticisms of Kephart’s writings on Appalachian culture, before moving on to argue that while Kephart was one of the leading gun writers of his day, he probably wasn’t much of an actual hunter. Among the most useful critiques in the volume is Denson’s succinct analysis of how Kephart essentially de-populated the Smokies in his promotional writings for the park. The people Kephart wrote so avidly about in Our Southern Highlanders make almost no appearance in the seemingly empty wilderness of the proposed parkland.

Not surprisingly, both Back of Beyond and Horace Kephart: Writings have professional librarians as co-authors or editors. Kephart the librarian might indeed have smiled down upon the labors of Frizzell and McCue for wrangling so much source materials into their volumes. The two volumes do much to make a substantial amount of information available to the reading public. Still, there is much left to say, especially as we revisit Kephart’s ethnographic work. Lauded for offering a fresh take on Appalachian culture and critiqued for his stereotypes, Kephart will continue to act as a touchstone for all those attempting to understand the history of ethnographic work in the Southern mountains.