

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Wilma Dykeman:
Battling the Waste of Resources

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Within myself, for instance, can I deny that there is a hostile gulf between the old acquisitive customer who wants more and more of everything (frequently with less and less satisfaction) and a younger creative self dedicated to understanding torn and wasted humanity everywhere? Within myself can I deny breakdown of communications between the need I see and the deed I do, the hope I cherish and the reality I support?

Beyond the differences in our outer trappings - ages (their freshly minted impatience and my weather-beaten enthusiasm), costumes (their miniskirts and my shirtwaists), dialect (their far-out, way-in jargon and my square antiquated language) - I suspect that the young dissenters are also saying, "Look to this day!"

They mean it, too.

I mean it. And I admire them - when they follow their own advice and look critically, listen sharply, think deeply, feel strongly. If they - if we all - turned on all the creative powers within us and dropped into real awareness of the wonder of our world, why then we should not have time or need to talk so much of gulfs and gaps. We could fulfill a vision.¹

In 1968, Wilma Dykeman's self examination and proposal to learn from generational differences in the expression of challenging the status quo reflected her passion for change. She believed in the power of conscious and true actions by looking, listening, thinking, and feeling. The "old acquisitive consumer who wants more and more" represented the ways in which people blindly followed the status quo without questioning its foundations. The "younger creative self dedicated to understanding torn and wasted humanity everywhere" directly attacked the status quo and its by-products of wasted human and natural resources. Wasting resources was defined by Dykeman as barriers that hindered the quality of all life on earth supported by human "greed, selfishness, and apathy...because we limit ourselves by our prejudices, and by our narrow shutting out of each other from the fullness of opportunity."² These wastes were embedded in stereotypes, racism, sexism, and misuse of the natural environment. Wilma Dykeman was concerned that modernity's so-called advancements actually fueled more alienated barrier between humans and their environment. People connected less with each other and nature because of technology's takeover of manual that had

¹ Wilma Dykeman, *Look to This Day* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 340.

² Danny Miller, "A MELUS Interview: Wilma Dykeman," *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 9 (Winter 1982): 57.

previously connected people and their environments in a very intimate way.³ Instead, humans succumbed to “greed, selfishness, and apathy.”

Dykeman’s particular goal of dismantling wasted resources reflected a newfound literary movement that “combined the social realism of earlier writers with the narrative traditions of Appalachian folktales and balladry”⁴ as well as a nationwide movement towards dissent during the post-World War Two era. Literature provided a gateway for promoting personal consciousness, empowerment, and responsibility that rejected traditional prejudices wasting human and natural resources. A central idea behind the new waves of literary and social activism was rooted in breaking down institutionalized societal hierarchies, like stereotypes, racism, and sexism. Wilma Dykeman praised men and women who contradicted mainstream competitive and violent behavior. She declared, “The gentle have the greatest of all authority....they believe that true supremacy flows from mutual respect, sincere and sustained effort at understanding, generosity of spirit, the courage to be kind to each living creature.”⁵ Fear should not command authority because it supported hierarchies that obstructed fulfilling the potential abilities of many human and natural resources. This declaration of a new set of authoritative standards represented Dykeman’s contributions to redefining regional Appalachian identity as well as the values of American society.

She highlighted the importance of individuals in transforming societal values. Patricia Gantt identified Dykeman’s “literary course” set by her first published book, *The French Broad*, as “arguing for freedom from bias as the only viable solution”⁶ to ending harmful effects caused by stereotypes, racism, sexism, and environmental exploitation. One method of battling the waste of resources was in demonstrating the benefits from the diverse human experience. Instead of

³ An example of this is the transformation in how humans get their water, seen in Wilma Dykeman, *The French Broad*, reprint of 1955 edition (Newport, TN: Wakestone Books, 1999), 281.

⁴ John A. Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 311.

⁵ Wilma Dykeman, *Explorations* (Newport, TN: Wakestone Books, 1984), 28.

⁶ Patricia M. Gantt, “A Mutual Journey: Wilma Dykeman and Appalachian Regionalism,” *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives of Women’s Regional Writing*, eds. Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 215.

conforming to a homogenous standardization, society as a whole would grow from incorporating a wide variety of people's abilities and knowledge. 1955's *The French Broad* illustrated the equal value that a hunter and a professor's contributions had in American society's development. Dykeman used elements of social realism and narrative tradition to show that the two men shared virtues of intelligence and an interest in the natural environment even if they "developed along different lines, with unlike methods and varying uses."⁷ By "sharing a common earth and an uncommon awareness of all its marvels,"⁸ Dykeman argued that these men exemplified why diversity of knowledge and experience is so influential in reducing the amount of waste of human and natural resources. Wilma Dykeman's literature and life actions relentlessly fought for a change in American society through demonstrating personal consciousness, empowerment, and accountability in order to stop the waste of resources, which hindered the quality of all life.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

There are a variety of scholarly articles available on Wilma Dykeman's literature, but they mainly provide "critical readings" of her work instead of historical analysis. Patricia Gantt, Elizabeth Engelhardt, Oliver Jones, Nancy Jentsch and Danny Miller have contributed to the field of Wilma Dykeman's literature. All of these scholars explored the reoccurring themes and styles in Dykeman's writing that have transformed the standards for future regional writers as well as social critics. Although each article has its own specific thesis, they all draw upon the idea that Wilma Dykeman was a courageous pioneer who fought for "land stewardship and social equality for all people regardless of race, gender, or social class."⁹ Journalist Quintin Ellison referred to Dykeman's

⁷ Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 65-66.

⁸ *Ibid*, 75.

⁹ Quintin Ellison, "Dykeman leaves tall literary, civic legacy," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, December 24, 2006, <http://www.citizen-times.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=200661223045> (accessed September 29, 2007).

writings and lectures as “doing what was right.”¹⁰ She called for welcoming the diverse human experience through personal awareness, empowerment, and accountability.

Patricia Gantt’s “A Mutual Journey: Wilma Dykeman and Appalachian Regionalism” examined Dykeman’s symbolic role as a writer for Appalachian identity. The article demonstrated the relationship between women and literature, where Dykeman advocated a new sense of pride in the diverse Appalachian heritage. Gantt asserted that since Dykeman’s first publication in the 1940’s, “she has continued to produce a prolific outpouring of fiction and non-fiction portraying the land and people of the Appalachian Mountains with realistic diversity and universality. Her writing shows us others, like ourselves, engaged in a struggle not just to endure, but to prevail.”¹¹ Through an analysis of Dykeman’s works, Gantt revealed how Dykeman battled stereotypes of all sorts in order to achieve universal themes that readers worldwide could relate to. The author proclaimed that Wilma Dykeman created a “dual imperative – a creative artist’s natural desire to tell stories that her public might enjoy and a social historian’s wish to elicit a rereading of the ‘texts’ of Appalachia.”¹² The “dual imperative” was implemented in all of Dykeman’s literature, referencing strong women, environmental concerns, and the problems with racial prejudices. In “Wilma Dykeman’s Tall Woman: Challenging the Stereotypes,” Gantt studied the ways in which Dykeman portrayed women in her literature as presenting “not only a [more realistic] time and place, however, but an approach to living.”¹³ Gantt arrived at the conclusion that Dykeman’s literature paralleled the identity transformation that Southern Appalachia underwent during the last half of the twentieth century.

Elizabeth Engelhardt’s “Wilma Dykeman and the Women of Appalachia: The Ecology of Mid-Century Environmental Activism” and *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism,*

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gantt, “A Mutual Journey: Wilma Dykeman and Appalachian Regionalism,” 198.

¹² Ibid, 206.

¹³ Patricia M. Gantt, “Wilma Dykeman’s Tall Woman: Challenging the Stereotypes,” *Iron Mountain Review* 5 (Spring 1989): 14.

and *Appalachian Literature* studied the alternative strands of feminism and environmentalism that Dykeman participated in contrast to the mainstream movements. The article first contributed to “the larger project of reenvisioning women’s participation in the theory and the literature of the environment.”¹⁴ Engelhardt argued that *The French Broad* deserved as much credit as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, because it’s foundations for environmental stewardship were “less essentialist, human-centered, and supportive of the status quo.”¹⁵ She used specific examples from *The French Broad* to provide examples in how Dykeman valued all life, without giving hierarchy within human life or valuing human life over other life on earth. Engelhardt explained Dykeman’s involvement in a female literary Appalachian tradition, concluding, “the alternative strand of philosophy and activism can help restore a sense of balance to our present discourse; understanding its more environmental, working-class, and placed feminism will help us to solutions dearly needed today.”¹⁶ Providing insight into another system of thinking, Engelhardt’s contributed to how Dykeman involved her passion in a longstanding tradition and came to establish the battle against the waste of resources.

Oliver Jones’ “Social Criticism in the Works of Wilma Dykeman” discussed why Dykeman’s writing set her apart from others authors of the 1950’s and 1960’s. The author asserted that, “examined in retrospect, she was something of prophet” in her concerns of racial and environmental problems.¹⁷ Dykeman was most bothered by the resulting waste of human resources induced by myths and stereotypes.¹⁸ She recognized that environment abuses “have occurred in the name of progress” and identified “the irony of people who are drawn to a place for its natural

¹⁴ Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, “Wilma Dykeman and the Women of Appalachia: The Ecology of Mid-Century Environmental Activism,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2001): 156.

¹⁵ Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 168.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 168.

¹⁷ Oliver K. Jones, III, “Social Criticism in the Works of Wilma Dykeman,” in *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, eds. Sharon Hatfield, Danny L. Miller, and Gurney Norman (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 77.

beauty yet end up wasting the land's resources until it becomes ugly."¹⁹ Providing textual examples for both the waste of human and natural resources, Jones demonstrated Dykeman's social criticisms. The article's main focus brought how themes, style, fiction, and non-fiction can transform regional writing into writing that is "universal and unlimited by time."²⁰

Nancy Jentsch and Danny Miller's "Lighting the Fuse: Wilma Dykeman and Sharon McCrumb as Appalachian 'Activists'" emphasized the role that regional literature plays in social change. The authors concluded that Dykeman "overcame boundaries of style and period" and interwove themes in their literature that could impact the cause for social change on an international scale.²¹ Editor Elizabeth Engelhardt noted, "Jentsch and Miller argue for the theoretical importance of fiction that uses words as agents of political change."²² They used a variety of textual examples to confirm what Dykeman considered as wasted resources. Their paper focused on environmental issues, race and class issues, loss of Appalachian culture, and Appalachian women. The loss of forest and the pollution of water symbolized ways in which humans wasted resources and were intended to elicit change.²³ They pointed out that Dykeman did not consider affiliate her self with the feminist movement²⁴, proving her commitment to breaking down barriers that separated humans from one another. "Lighting the Fuse" showed that literature can be a creative tool to "fulfill a vision" of change.²⁵

A more in-depth historical analysis of Wilma Dykeman's activism through lifestyle and literature is needed. She participated in a long line of Appalachian female authors who addressed

¹⁹ Ibid, 83.

²⁰ Ibid, 89.

²¹ Nancy Jentsch and Danny Miller, "Lighting the Fuse: Wilma Dykeman and Sharon McCrumb as Appalachian Activists," in *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women's Studies*, ed. Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 76, 93.

²² Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, "Preface," *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women's Studies*, ed. Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), xii.

²³ Jentsch and Miller, 78.

²⁴ Ibid, 83.

²⁵ Dykeman, *Look to This Day*, 340.

issues tied in social and environmental justice.²⁶ Dykeman demonstrated that life and literature can be used a means to achieve a society where individuals had the power transform their relationship with each other as and with their natural surroundings. As Jentsch and Miller pointed out, Wilma Dykeman wrote about her concerns facing American, “particularly what she saw as a waste – a waste of natural resources and the environment, waste of human potential as a result of racial, class, and gender prejudices.”²⁷ She wanted to break down barriers that disconnected people from each other and their environment by creating an alternative model of living that focused on “diversity and imagination.”²⁸ Dykeman did this through writing, teaching, giving speeches, and participating in projects that promoted change. She fought the waste of resources not only through literature but also through conscious action with an understanding that these societal problems wasting human and natural resources directly decreased her own quality of life.

A PERSONAL HISTORY

Wilma Dykeman’s purpose in writing was deeply rooted in the history of the Southern Appalachia region and the people that lived there. She grew up on the outskirts of Asheville, North Carolina, one of the largest urban centers located in the region. Her mother’s family were longtime natives of Appalachia while and her father was a relocated New Yorker. Her parents both shared a passion for the outdoors and reading.²⁹ Additionally, Jerome Dykeman, her older half brother, was active in the Carolina Mountain Club’s movement to preserve the Appalachian virgin timber forests being encroached upon by those eager to clear-cut.³⁰ The surroundings in which and people that she grew up around gave her a unique ability to examine the world with an urban edge in addition to the

²⁶ Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots*, 168, 171.

²⁷ Jentsch and Miller, 84.

²⁸ Ina Hughs, “Natural Woman,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, August 25, 2002,

http://www.knoxnews.com/kns/local_news/article/0,1406,KNS_347_5235522,00.html (accessed September 29, 2007).

²⁹ Ibid. Also in Wilma Dykeman, “The Past is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past,” in *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*, ed. Joyce Dyer (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 106-108.

³⁰ Jerome Dykeman, Jerome Dykeman Papers, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

stereotypical Appalachian experience. Early in life, her parents ingrained in Wilma Dykeman the importance of history, literature, and the natural world. In a 2001 acceptance speech for the North Caroliniana Society Award, Dykeman recalled her parents' role in her identity formation:

The heritage that Bonnie and Williard gave me might be best understood by a moment in my childhood by our stream. As we stood watching the water splash over the rocks, around boulders, beneath the tall trees and clumps of rhododendron, they suddenly asked if I knew where a creek was born. Born? I didn't know a creek was born. Deep in the mountains around us, they said, where the water from rain gathered in webs of roots and earth and deep springs and was gradually released into the clear, bold flow we were watching and hearing....It was my first lesson in globalization. I lived in a little mountain valley that might seem to strangers to be remote from the rest of the world, but was, in fact, connected to all the world.³¹

An early awareness of the how systems in the natural world worked allowed Wilma Dykeman to critically analyze ideas and institutions. She understood the importance of human relationships with each other and to their environments. Growing up outside one of the largest cities in Appalachia enabled Dykeman to understand both urban and rural living. Her childhood and early adulthood gave her first hand accounts of how a variety of people lived, in relation to their environment, gender, race, and region. Throughout her life, she studied the ways in which humans alienated themselves from and connected themselves to one another and the environment they lived in. Living in the Great Depression, World War Two, and the decades following, it became apparent to Dykeman that along with modernity's efficiencies, there were also ignored and lingering problems. She considered these problems to be a waste of resources that "embezzled minutes and hours" because they inhibited people from reaching their full potential "of a richer spirit" to grow as human beings.³²

This stunted growth and wasteful atmosphere created a world characterized by Dykeman as "impersonal and impermanent" which was in contrast to the values that she learned growing up. She

³¹ Wilma Dykeman, *Roots and Branches* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Caroliniana Society and North Carolina Collections, 2001), 5.

³² Wilma Dykeman, *Explorations*, 105-106.

consistently fought for an alternative approach of conscious living called "the simple life." In 1968, Wilma Dykeman discussed the difficulties in achieving simplicity, but emphasized its benefits:

Its satisfactions are unique - personal and permanent at a moment in a world where all seems to grow increasingly impersonal and impermanent.

The simple life begins in nature and ends in human nature and seeks an elemental experience of each. It rejects the gaudy "necessities" and the trivial ornamentation by which we separate ourselves from the earth, the wind, the woods, and water, which are still man's natural habitat despite his proliferation of concrete city canyons and labyrinths of asphalt and miasmatic smogs.

It renounces the dozens of elaborate deceptions by which we separate ourselves from one another. It seeks the essential rather than the sensational in our human relationships, despite a nationally intensified appetite for the gross, the obvious, the meaningless encounter.³³

Dykeman's proposal to simplify reflected in her writing, as many of the themes, people, or characters dealt with issues of how to reconnect with other humans and nature. Her literature and lifestyle were concerted efforts to stop the waste of resources by encouraging conscious changes to "personally and permanently" relate to the diverse world that all people lived in.

Wilma Dykeman's life in higher education heightened her attentiveness to social, political, economic, and environmental concerns. She attended Biltmore College in Asheville, North Carolina, where she contributed and served as a co-editor of *Bluets*, the college's "literary magazine dedicated to the expression of progressive undergraduate opinion."³⁴ During 1937 and 1938, Dykeman was on her way to finding her own unique literary voice. In a 1938 editorial, she encouraged people to never lower their morals in exchange for economic incentives because "every time a person accepts a job that satisfies only his lower instincts, every time he receives a check for doing some task that calls for the sacrifice of belief, he has sold a part of himself, something that

³³ Dykeman, *Look to This Day*, 4.

³⁴ *Bluets*, 11, no. 2 (May 1938), University Archives, D.H. Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville: 1.

money cannot buy back.”³⁵ This criticism of economic motives which compromised moral values was an early indicator of Dykeman’s later criticisms on the waste of human and natural resources.

Her voice of dissent in her early stages as a writer developed into strong critic who was against "impersonal and impermanent" acts wasting human and natural resources. After her two years at Biltmore College, Dykeman finished her bachelor’s degree in speech at Northwestern University, where she had the opportunity to live outside of Southern Appalachia.³⁶ This time away from the region allowed her to examine the meaning of Appalachia in relationship to the larger part of American society. In a 1982 interview, Wilma Dykeman asked,

How do we discover the roots of difficulties in our own region and society if we don’t try to discover them in ourselves and interpret them for ourselves? This is one of the things, more than any, that has made me want to write, when I have been concerned about these things, is to try and understand where it comes from and how you can change it.³⁷

She was able to identify the relationship’s significance as an indicator of the wasted resources that inflicted America. Through study and writing, Dykeman offered progressive ideas for transforming wasted resources into useful, cultivated resources, like

The years after college were also important in forming Dykeman’s perspective and literary career. When she moved back to Southern Appalachia after graduation, she met and married James Stokely, a man from Newport, Tennessee who also shared a passion for social change, journalism, and literature. They took dual residence in Newport and Asheville and together they wrote about the happening through the country, proposing ways in which to change the problems that faced the

³⁵ Wilma Dykeman, “Editorial Comment, Wanted: Men and Women Not For Sale,” *Bluets* 11, no. 2 (May 1938) University Archives, D.H. Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville: 3.

³⁶ Fred Brown, “Appalachian Journal: Author Captures Land’s Grace on Paper,” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, April 18, 2004, http://www.knoxnews.com/kns/news_columnists/article/0,1406,KNS_359_5235519,00.html (accessed September 29, 2007).

³⁷ Miller, “A MELUS Interview,” 55.

country by specifically addressing Southern Appalachia.³⁸ During the 1950's and 1960's Wilma Dykeman began to focus in on battling the waste of human and natural resources through stereotypes, racism, sexism, and depleting the natural environment.

Although Dykeman's form of activism was mostly through writing, she also participated in organizations and institutions aimed at social change. Throughout her life, some of the places she was involved in included the Southern Regional Council, the Highland Center, the North Carolina Writer's Conference, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Riverlink, the YWCA, the University of Tennessee, Berea College, and the University of North Carolina at Asheville.³⁹ Jim Stokely, her youngest of two sons, described her activism as freelance participator. Stokely remarked, "Mother did not base her career within organizations, but she recognized the value of organizations and the committed individuals working in and leading them. She was always speaking or otherwise engaged in organizations as a temporary partner in getting specific things done."⁴⁰ Wilma Dykeman fought passionately for what she believed in, and that was to end the waste of human and natural resources. She wanted to reform societal values that prioritized human relationships and the natural world over monetary or material advancement. Her activism was channeled through, but not limited to, writing, speeches, and particular projects. Dykeman's participation in these various organizations, institutions, and projects illustrated her commitment to breaking down barriers that separated people from experiencing the variety that life has to offer.

APPALACHIAN STEREOTYPES

Understanding the relationship between the people of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and the rest of American is essential to providing a solid foundation of the writing and life of Wilma

³⁸ Examples include their journalism of race relations in the South in Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Neither Black Nor White* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1957) and "Our Changing South: A Challenge" in *We Dissent*, ed. Hoke Norris (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1962).

³⁹ Jim Stokely, 26 September 2007, personal e-mail message (29 September 2007).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Dykeman. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were many “three day experts,” like travel writers, religious missionaries, and social scientists who voiced their opinions about the residents who were “untouched by the progressive and unifying forces that seemed to be at work elsewhere in the United States.”⁴¹ These biased portrayals lead to “three tendencies that shaped the twentieth-century perception of Appalachia as a cultural region,” including 1) the habit of generalizing the entire region, 2) using folklife as an instrument to advance outsider “uplift,” and 3) ignoring the racial and social diversity of the region.⁴² As a native from the region, Dykeman knew these popular perceptions to be untrue and harmful to its inhabitants because their role in American society had been predetermined with falsifications.

Through fiction and non-fiction, she aimed to provide readers with a more realistic portrayal of Appalachia, whose residents were like all other humans in their wants and needs.⁴³ They were no more white, poor, or backward than the rest of the world. However, “the neglect, the waste of those human resources arose to an important extent from” political motives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to portray Southern Appalachian residents something other than American.⁴⁴ These stereotypes restrained individuals from believing in their potential as human beings to contribute to society. Breaking down the traditional label empowered those living in Appalachia who were once stereotyped to ask questions as well as have pride in their past. Avoiding the one-dimensional character, Wilma Dykeman approached writing as a way to provide voice for “the unknown person, the person who is not famous, who doesn’t become well-known, who influences

⁴¹ Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Minds: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 5. Some examples of works that stereotyped Appalachian residents and influenced popular perspectives include Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of Life Among the Mountaineers* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), and Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains*, reprint of 1905 ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

⁴² Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 209-212.

⁴³ For examples, see Wilma Dykeman, *The French Broad* and *The Tall Woman* reprint of 1962 edition (Newport: Wakestone Books, 1982).

⁴⁴ Wilma Dykeman, “Appalachia in Context,” in *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams*, ed. J.W. Williamson (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University Press, 1977), 32.

so much of life.”⁴⁵ She directly attacked the long-reigning Appalachian stereotype through acknowledging the everyday person by creating a more diverse base of personas in her fiction and non-fiction.

In 1955 she discussed the personal traditions of Appalachia as well as the violent problems associated with moonshine production. Dykeman concluded that the French Broad region held aspects of “our pioneer past” and was “a paradox of violence and gentleness, their crimes are not as a rule impersonal cold-blooded robberies and murders of our big cities and gangs. They are crimes of emotion.... and almost always personal.”⁴⁶ By 1977, Dykeman adamantly criticized the idea that Appalachia was more violent than the rest of America. She asserted, “The variance in social acceptability [of crime] seemed to be determined in part by the economic status of the participants and by the public enormity of the violence.”⁴⁷ Essentially, people living in the region were not any more violent than the rest of the country but were scrutinized to diffuse from other national security problems. These and similar stereotypes wasted human resources because they promoted Appalachia as a place where violence was permitted. The “hillbilly” image that Dykeman battled in writing and life did no justice to Appalachian residents even if they were “at once so maddening and so charming, wrong about so many things and yet fundamentally right so often.”⁴⁸

In her first novel, *The Tall Woman*, published in 1962, Wilma Dykeman presented the reader with a strong, open-minded female protagonist. Lydia McQueen defied the clichéd notion of an Appalachian woman by showing leadership and humility. McQueen’s life “embodied all kinds of creative forces, one who really cared about the world around her – the natural world and the human world.”⁴⁹ Although McQueen lived in post-Civil War Appalachia and had never journeyed outside

⁴⁵ Wilma Dykeman and Richard Marius, “The Rooted Heart and the Ranging Intellect: A Conversation,” *Iron Mountain Review* 5 (Spring 1989): 10.

⁴⁶ Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 247.

⁴⁷ Dykeman, “Appalachia in Context,” 37.

⁴⁸ Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 25.

⁴⁹ Dykeman and Marius, “The Rooted Heart and the Ranging Intellect: A Conversation,” 10.

of the region, she wondered about the meaning of life and the future, where “she could be carrying off in big dreams and plans somewhere beyond the everyday world they knew, and then all at once her mood would shift and she would be plain and practical again.”⁵⁰ Characters like McQueen illustrated universal themes for the purpose of showing readers unfamiliar with the region that there was an abundance of valuable human resources inside the region that had long been neglected.

In 1977, Dykeman declared the illegitimacy of Appalachian stereotypes, “For too long the biases and half-truths of both statistics and popular fiction have made distortions of Appalachia cheaper to credit than to confute.”⁵¹ Sensationalism and neglecting to convey the diversity of region’s residents predetermined the potential of those targeted by the stereotype. This biased representation of Appalachian people allowed outsiders to impose their feeling of superiority on the region. Through a paternalistic approach “whatever they [exploiters] found they could seize and use to their own purposes with apparent impunity.”⁵² Outsider perspectives on the region reflected desires of trying to define what American meant as the country grew into a more modern, industrialized society.

She observed that there were “so many facets to” the Appalachian experience that have for too long been considered insignificant, like the stories of many women, African Americans, small town residents, rural residents, and urban residents.⁵³ Wilma Dykeman focused on the value of the everyday human experience and the appreciation of diversity in her writing:

The central, most enduring lesson I absorbed was that every person was special and unique. No human being could be stereotyped by sex, race, class, religion, age, nationality – all the ways we separate ourselves from each other without at the same time honoring our variety. I learned that no corner of the world was without wonder, that every living creature or plant or drop of water holds miracles of we would look, listen, think, relate.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Dykeman, *The Tall Woman*, 80.

⁵¹ Dykeman, “Appalachia in Context,” 28.

⁵² *Ibid*, 38.

⁵³ Miller, “A MELUS Interview,” 48.

⁵⁴ Dykeman, “The Past Is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past,” 107.

Stereotypes ignored unique and connecting lessons of many experiences. Wilma Dykeman proposed that society ought to acknowledge the benefits of variety rather than forcing a hierarchical system of life because “the freedom from discipline and to seek the power of imagination” could achieve personal freedom and development “to the highest possible potential, which is indeed the challenge for all of us.”⁵⁵ All of the once-ignored experiences from the past and present could keep on wasting away or they could be used to their full potential by means of creative, progressive ideas.

To combat the waste of human lives due to stereotypes, she encouraged personal consciousness, empowerment, and accountability. Dykeman used sources creatively her in social histories to open up an opportunity to reexamine the history of Appalachian stereotypes in order to make room for new opportunities.⁵⁶ Wilma Dykeman showed that the people living in Appalachia were not any more isolated, ignorant, or violent than the rest of America.⁵⁷ Not only did this empower the people of the region, but it challenged people outside of Appalachia to critically examine their own identity by reading “a great deal more” and going out and interacting “with other human beings a great deal more, trying to understand and listen and hear what it is that people are saying or not saying.”⁵⁸ Centering her life on family, land, books, and travel, Dykeman exemplified a woman who found out what life was about through experience instead of hearsay or stereotypes.⁵⁹ By questioning, listening, and traveling, Dykeman concerned her writing with the waste of so many human lives in Appalachia. Hence, her literary career transformed over time from a moderate social historian to an active voice for changing societal norms and values.

⁵⁵ Wilma Dykeman, “Coming Up To Sunlight” *UNCA Bulletin* :17.

⁵⁶ See Wilma Dykeman, “Appalachia in Context.”

⁵⁷ For examples, look at Wilma Dykeman, *The French Broad*, “Appalachia In Context,” and *Neither Black Nor White*.

⁵⁸ Miller, “A MELUS Interview,” 56.

⁵⁹ Dykeman, *Roots and Branches*, 8.

RACISM AND SEXISM

In addition to Appalachian stereotypes, racism and sexism were socially-constructed tools of oppression, disfranchising many people from realizing their full potential. Wilma Dykeman's "southern liberalism" for equality among all people showed in her published fiction, non-fiction, and journalism. Historian Pete Daniel asserted that in her attempts to fight the waste of resources prevalent in racism and sexism, Dykeman was frustrated with the press and television because she was "largely frozen out of the media" that supported the stereotypical South.⁶⁰ However, through conscious acts of listening and learning, Dykeman was able to communicate with other "Southern Liberals" who also helped dismantle racism and sexism in American society. Dykeman used fictional characters like Lydia McQueen, Ivy Cortland, and Jon Clayborn as symbols in confronting the wasteful problems of racism and sexism in any time or place. Each character "allowed readers to see an exposed, unattractive racism, and to see the possibilities when people attempt to overcome them."⁶¹

In an attempt to dethrone the "Solid South," Dykeman and her husband James Stokely traveled through South in order to find out for themselves the many different opinions on race. They debunked the myth of one South by interviewing over five hundred various people, who were black, white, rich, poor, etc.⁶² They observed, "Each year of our lives we have seen the South growing less and less homogenous and we believed that in this time of transition...we should like to know firsthand, feel, and hear and see, not only the loud public character, both these many Souths."⁶³ While others created one South, Dykeman and Stokely showed all of the wasted and neglected humans whose voices were masked by the fearful institution of racism.

⁶⁰Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950's* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., 2000) 187.

⁶¹ Jones, 80.

⁶² Dykeman and Marius, "The Rooted Heart and the Ranging Intellect: A Conversation," 12.

⁶³ Dykeman and Stokely, 4.

Dykeman raised awareness of the wasted human resources left by racism by creating a new way of appreciating the variety of human life. She argued against the popular position of paternalism, where white people knew what was best for black people. Dykeman and Stokely wrote, “And it has not occurred to them until recently that the Negro might have a whole area of thought and experience that was blocked off to white knowledge.”⁶⁴ Dykeman pointed out that the Montgomery Bus Boycott revealed the codependency of blacks and whites. The boycott created a refreshed sense of self for black Southerners who were “indoctrinated for generations by assurances of his inferiority” and now had “discovered the power of their dollars, the strength of their religion, and the hidden resources within themselves.”⁶⁵ Again, she encouraged confidence in the diversification of American society by showing the new ways for everyone to personally grow.

Dykeman fought against racism because it did not represent the diversity of the human experience and contributed to a hierarchical model of society. In 1962, she disputed the legitimacy of “separate but equal” and asserted, “We are seeing blasted today the myth that people can be fully committed to education in a democracy without also being committed to every person’s mobility on the social, political, and professional ladder. The myth of our aristocracy has persisted.”⁶⁶ This aristocracy had a longstanding political agenda of ignoring anti-racist opinions in order to give the false pretense of the “Solid South.” Just like Appalachian stereotypes, racism had roots in politics. Considering racism to be a handicap on the quality of life, Dykeman addressed this issue in all of her novels, showing the harm of prejudices against a person simply due to the color of their skin.⁶⁷ Dykeman communicated that overcoming the waste of human resources could be “achieved only by use of our intelligence, our imagination, and our ability, so far remarkably dormant, at self analysis

⁶⁴ Dykeman and Stokely, *Neither Black Nor White*, 22.

⁶⁵ Dykeman and Stokely, “Montgomery Morning: December 1956,” in *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2003), 359.

⁶⁶ Dykeman and Stokely, “Our Changing South,” 9.

⁶⁷ Look at Wilma Dykeman, *The Tall Woman*, *The Far Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966) and *Return The Innocent Earth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973).

and objectivity.”⁶⁸ This meant that people had to live consciously, empower themselves, and take accountability for their actions.

Similar in its constraints to racism, sexism prevented a full appreciation of the diverse human experience that Dykeman discussed. She focused on making opportunities for women more free, emphasizing women’s ability to be a “preserver, nourisher, and sustainer of both family and community life, cultural if not political.”⁶⁹ Predetermined roles and characteristics about both men and women were barriers to growth and thus wasted potential resources for a higher quality of life. When asked about the influence her husband had on her activism and writing style in a world dominated by men, Dykeman responded, “Mine is not a feminist world nor a masculine world – it’s a peoples world. Of course we influenced each other! My goodness! What a way to live if you didn’t think each one was having some influence on the other.”⁷⁰ This statement reflects how Dykeman interacted with the world around her in a symbiotic and interdependent fashion.

In her written works, Wilma Dykeman constantly documented women as vital to their communities, even if their contributions had once been neglected resources. Dykeman’s biographical *Tennessee Women: An Infinite Variety* highlighted many women’s shared “courage and variety” where the courage is physical, social, political, and “of the mind and spirit.” This courage ranged from political, social, intellectual, and economic activism that, as Dykeman described, reflected the variety of Tennessee’s geography and natural resources.⁷¹ Other examples of so-called ordinary women as vital, dynamic leaders of their community can be seen in *The Tall Woman’s* Lydia McQueen, *The Far Family’s* Ivy Cortland, and Edna Rankin McKinnon in *Too Many People, Too Little Love*. Furthermore, Dykeman related these women and their efforts to

⁶⁸ Dykeman and Stokely, “Our Changing South: A Challenge,” 6.

⁶⁹ Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 11.

⁷⁰ Dykeman and Maruis, “The Rooted Heart and the Ranging Intellect: A Conversation”: 8.

⁷¹ Wilma Dykeman, *Tennessee Women: An Infinite Variety* (Newport: Wakestone Books, 1993), 21-23.

make life better for their community to battling the waste of human resources. Women's role in the health of societies had to be reevaluated in its influence and needed to given its proper due.

In Appalachia, Dykeman recognized the difficulty of understanding women's role in the community due to traditional stereotypes. As an Appalachian woman, she lead by example as her life went against the status quo, with many social criticisms. In the classes that she taught, Dykeman tried "not to separate lots of these things [problems with stereotypes, race, and gender] in her teachings. Instead Dykeman stated that she tried to bring in, for example, "Nikki Giovanni, both as a woman, as a black, as an Appalachian, but first and all as a creative person."⁷² In teaching a wide range of Appalachian literature, Dykeman set a personal example of consciousness, empowerment, and responsibility towards social change. Her belief that "man, in all his uniqueness, is still part of universal humanity" was apparent through teaching, giving speeches, and writing with a purpose to improve the quality of life for all people.⁷³ Wilma Dykeman aimed to paint a more realistic portrait of what it meant to be woman or black through writing and action. If this happened, people might begin to value human relationships and the natural world over material or monetary gain entrenched in old traditions of stereotypes, racism, and sexism.

ENVIRONMENTAL WASTE

Dykeman considered the abuse and subsequent waste of natural resources to be a result of modernity's alienating technological advances as it encouraged humans to become less thoughtful about the environment they lived in. Specifically, she rejected traditional environmentalist dismissal of local Appalachian attitudes and practiced "looking at the historical realities that contributed to local sentiment and critically assessed the imposition of values from outside the region."⁷⁴ Through

⁷² Miller, "A MELUS Interview," 49.

⁷³ Wilma Dykeman, *Look to This Day*, 137.

⁷⁴ Michael Ann Williams, "'When I Can Read My Title Clear': Anti-Environmentalism and Sense of Place in the Great Smoky Mountains," in *Culture, Environment, and Conservation in the Appalachian South*, ed. Benita J. Howell (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 98.

breaking down socially-constructed barriers like stereotypes, racism, and sexism, Dykeman always related problems and solutions back to the natural environment. For example, when she wrote about the problems of segregation and modernity in 1962, Wilma Dykeman asserted,

As it was the land that shaped our Southern way of life, so it is the use men made of the land that has brought us to our present paradox: from it comes our history and our future survival, our prosperity and our poverty, our enormous problems and our great potential. It was not slavery, or later segregation, that defined a Southern way of life; too many have doubted the system of segregation. But Southerners, longer and later than any others in our country, have remained close to the land. This has complicated our entrances into the industrial age. Perhaps it has also permitted us certain gifts and understandings that can be of value if we will be use them on the world scene today.⁷⁵

The complex relationship between race relations and the land in the South reflected Dykeman's examination at the complexity of systems in the world. The history of the South could provide a new way of interpreting environmental stewardship by connecting social and environmental issues. By looking at their relationship to the land, Southerners could realize their dependency on each other and the natural, beginning to cultivate a "balance between the urban and the rural, between man and the machine, between making a living and making a life."⁷⁶ Here Dykeman and Stokely directly address how connecting with other humans and the natural world could end the waste of so many natural resources.

Dykeman proposed that a high quality of life, personally or materially, could not be sustained or obtained through mistreating natural resources. In *The French Broad* she explicitly claimed, "There are elements of beauty and purity that apparently must be sacrificed if modern life is to be satisfied. Since streams have the dual purpose in man's organized society of supplying water and carrying off refuse, it is unintelligent not to recognize each function."⁷⁷ Ignoring the important function that natural resources like streams have in the supportive foundation of modern

⁷⁵ Dykeman and Stokely, "Our Changing South: A Challenge," 7.

⁷⁶ Dykeman and Stokely, "Our Changing South: A Challenge," 13.

⁷⁷ Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 285.

life is one way of wasting natural resources. Dykeman advocated for a human stewardship instead of ignorance in order to preserve and replenish natural resources.

Dykeman internalized the problems of wasting human and natural resources due to her connection to the region of Appalachia. Perhaps the legacy of the “resource curse” using cheap human labor in extracting natural resources made Wilma Dykeman more attune to wasted resources. Historian Kathy Newfont suggested Dykeman’s passion against the misuse of the earth was due to, “The geological and biological inheritance in the Southern Appalachian Mountains has impacted any person that has lived here.”⁷⁸ Dykeman asserted that the modern standard of living could not be sustainable if people did not “personally and permanently” connect with the land on a conscious basis. Like her opposition to societal pressures to conform, she wanted nature to determine its own course, suggesting, “Let us leave a few streams free to wander out of ordered channels. Let us leave a few people free to be unique – and pioneer new frontiers for us. Let us leave areas of our lives unpattered – vital and luminous.”⁷⁹ Like people whose voices were suppressed, Wilma Dykeman provided a voice for the natural world.

In addition to water pollution and resources extractions (like timber or coal), Wilma Dykeman connected to the problem of wasting environmental resources to the lack of education about birth control. Although it might be considered a social issue, it took place a heavy burden on the natural world. Dykeman believed the issue of birth control to be “the basic question in almost all our problems today” even though we might think that disappearing animals is the problem. In 1989, she hypothesized “the pressure of people and population on the land is the greatest pressure, yet apparently no one in all of these various committees and environmental groups relate this.”⁸⁰ For Dykeman, this related directly back to the waste of human resources due to stereotypes, racism,

⁷⁸ Kathy Newfont, Interview by author, 3 September 2007, Written Notes.

⁷⁹ Dykeman, *Explorations*, 38.

⁸⁰ Dykeman and Maruis, “The Rooted Heart and the Ranging Intellect: A Conversation,” 11.

and sexism because population growth was highest in developing countries where human life was somehow viewed as less valuable.

Dykeman united the problems with technological advancement to environmental neglect. The initially-controversial chapter in *The French Broad* called “Who Killed the French Broad,” where Wilma Dykeman detoured away from her role as a social historian and instead wrote as an activist for future changes toward environmental stewardship.

The French Broad country is particularly a region of springs. The water of most of the brooks and streams and rivers they form is as nearly pure, in its pristine state, as water can be. But we turned away from the spring at the edge of the kitchen yard and turned on the faucet in our porcelain sink, we turned off our interest in what came out of the spigot. One by one we allowed ourselves and others to begin the rape which finally (in places) ended in the murder of the French Broad. And it had come about because the headwaters were so pure, so neatly perfect.

The sole blame for the river’s fouling could be laid to no one person or group. Because the river belongs to everyone, it is the possession of no one.⁸¹

Our turning on the faucet was just another way in which technology alienated societal values from caring for the natural resources. Wilma Dykeman showed that lack of understanding about the ways in which humans acquired the resources they used up so quickly made them apathetic to the health of the source. Ending the waste of the precious resource of water will change only when laws by individuals “assume its responsibilities along with its rights.”⁸² She called for ending apathy on a personal and societal level, with conscious, concerted efforts in land stewardship.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Wilma Dykeman fought her own vulnerability of being a wasted resource by “reaching out from the many roles by which I am defined but never really known, rejecting those definitions which shove complex relationships into narrow pigeonholes.”⁸³ Through personal choices, Dykeman honed methods in battling the status quo’s fear of diverse citizenship through promoting a

⁸¹ Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 281.

⁸² Ibid, 293.

⁸³ Dykeman, *Explorations*, 3.

homogeneous mask. As a woman and an Appalachian native, she knew she was susceptible to the pressures of conformity. Instead of giving in, Dykeman choose a bold path of literary activism, teaching, and giving speeches that constantly challenged the status quo. Her environmental concerns reflected her concern for the health of life on earth, showing her commitment to “a look at total culture and that it not be seen from the standpoint that we can only write about ourselves.”⁸⁴ No one could detach their quality of life from the waste of human or natural resources that happened through stereotypes, racism, sexism, or environmental depletion.

Society today is still struggling with the problems that Wilma Dykeman began to analyze during the 1950’s and 1960’s. She led by example, encouraging others to live their own lives through constantly questioning and challenging the power structure. The words and actions of Wilma Dykeman are without boundaries of time and place because she addressed universal human issues. An appreciation for the diversity that surrounded her enabled Dykeman to understand the indestructible power of the natural world, even if humans thought they mastered all knowledge. Reflecting on a pair of bookends whose irreplaceable source and ancient origins were created from some of the oldest trees in America, Dykeman assessed the value of the human and natural resources that contributed to the making of the bookends as indispensable. She realized that “holding the bookends made from one small segment of the poplar’s body, it is good to contemplate the sweep of centuries, the flow of animal and bird and plant life, the cycle of seasons which are a part of this life. Such a link with nature’s immortality has value beyond easy assessment.”⁸⁵ Her conclusion taught that personal human choices have the power to affirm life and the power to end the waste of resources. It is up to individuals to change their lives and to realize the connection of all life on earth.

⁸⁴ Dykeman and Marius, “The Rooted Heart and The Ranging Intellect: A Conversation,” 12.

⁸⁵ Dykeman, *Explorations*, 202.

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