



Night Comes to the Cumberlands

By Harry M. Caudill

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Night Comes to the Cumberlands By Harry M. Caudill

The late Harry M. Caudill saw the land and people of Appalachia with an unflinching eye. His classic, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, follows the long road traveled by the Southern mountaineer.

His biography of the Cumberland Plateau begins in the violence of Indian wars and ends in the economic despair of the 1950s and 1960s. Two hundred years ago, the plateau was a land of promise. The deep, twisting valleys contained rich bottomlands; the mountainsides, teeming with game, produced mighty timber. Some of the people who settled this land in the eighteenth century may have come from the slums of England, but they became intrepid explorers like Simon Kenton and Jim Bridger. They lived by scratch farming, hunting, and making moonshine whiskey. The Civil War ravaged their land, leaving in its wake a legacy of hate which erupted in the great Kentucky mountain feuds and continued in the "Moonshine Wars" of the Prohibition era.

In the late nineteenth century, the coal men came into the isolated valleys and easily persuaded the mountaineers to sign away their mineral rights for pitifully small sums. The countryside was then systematically plundered in what constitutes one of the ugliest eras of exploitation in American history.

At the time it was written, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* framed an urgent appeal to the American conscience. Today it details Appalachia's difficult past, and, at the same time, presents an accurate historical backdrop for a contemporary understanding of the Appalachian region that Harry M. Caudill loved so dearly and served so well.

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