

Approaching the Reading:

In [*The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories That Shape Us*](#) (Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2015), author Michael Lafrate says it is a “sacred question” to ask, “What is it like to be you in this place?” To answer that question is not a closed process, and never finished. *The Telling Takes Us Home* models a process of listening to diverse voices within a place, a region often called Appalachia, on the way to answering the sacred question. “Our goal,” in *The Telling*, was “not to amass information... but to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”

Father John Rausch, a long-time activist in Appalachia, noted that there is an “hermeneutical struggle” between “resource” and “home” in the “story of the mountains.” *The Telling Takes Us Home* offers guidance for any who would resist a dread sense of inevitability regarding the exploitation of the land and people. Instead, as Father Rausch said, *The Telling Takes Us Home* opens “a mystic activism” that makes the story of Appalachia a story of “home.”

As you open *Ramp Hollow*, take a moment to ponder: If I were going to answer the “sacred question” of “What is it like to be me in this place,” what *place* would I be thinking of first, or naturally as it were? Would I think of another place as a close second? Am I seeking another place that I haven’t found yet?

Ramp Hollow provides a history of Appalachia stocked by stories of resistance to exploitation. It documents the “hermeneutical struggle” over whether Appalachia is a “resource” or “home.” As you work through the chapters, you will be taking a journey through specific instances when the struggle between resource and home became acute. From a macro-level, or the micro-levels of each of the chapters, you will have the opportunity as a reader to try on the perspectives of insiders to the region, and stand in shoes of outsiders coming into the region. As such, you will be doing the very thing that the course, *Appalachian Church in Society* aims to teach: to read your context in such a way as to hear your neighbors, God’s creation and yourself to be addressed by God’s Word and participants in God’s creativity.

“Preface” in *Ramp Hollow*

Author Steven Stoll writes about two different cabins in Ramp Hollow, West Virginia, on pp xv-xviii. The two cabins are evidence of two different kinds of history in Appalachia: people making a home there and claiming their lives; and people exploited by industrial powers that colonized the region. As a reader, you can keep the two cabins in mind throughout the book because they represent the two kinds of narrative competing for Appalachia across its history.

Chapter One: Contemporary Ancestors, From Daniel Boone to Hill-Billy

This chapter frames colonization of the region by Europeans and the atrocity of forced exile of many of the original Appalachians who were named Cherokee, Seminole, Creek and other tribal titles. Stoll writes that “Andrew Jackson dismissed the Cherokee as a failed race.” (p26). Invaders to the region used other labels meant to impose insufficiency. On pp 28-34, Stoll introduces and critiques rhetoric that denigrated agrarian and subsistence lives of people who belonged to places that exploiters came to take or drain. As a reader, you’re getting the early history of the region in this chapter plus historical detail on the competing hermeneutical categories “resource” and “home.”

Chapter Two: Provision Grounds, On Capitalism and the Atlantic Peasantry

This is an important chapter that links what happened in Appalachia to a long history of stratified class structure in Europe, and the aggressive method of “enclosure” used by nobles to dispossess peasants. The chapter exposes American rhetoric about “frontier” to be a mythic gloss on the exploitation and dispossession of American agrarians. The chapter ends with a vignette about Daniel Boone’s people moving into the Appalachian region, only to be destined for dispossession (pp 86-89).

Chapter Three: The Rye Rebellion, Why Alexander Hamilton Invaded the Mountains

Even if you didn’t care about Appalachia, you’d want to know the history of that which is commonly called the “Whiskey Rebellion,” because it is a classic case of resistance to taxation and manipulation of local economy by outside interests. Stoll adeptly teaches how the Rye Rebellion set up tensions between federal and local power that hang over Appalachia for years to come.

Chapter Four: Mountaineers Are Always Free, On Losing Land and Livelihood

A key chapter that details the story of dispossession of agrarians for the sake of industries (timber, coal, oil and eventually gas). As a reader, you need to know this part of the history to (a) hear the resentment of common people in the region, and (b) to see how systematic the invasion and dispossession have been across time and space. The Hatfield-McCoy feud is in this chapter on pp 166-168.

Chapter Five: Interlude: Agrarian Twilight, The Art of Dispossession

This is the cultural history to match the economic history in the previous chapter. This chapter is also full of crucial information if you want to listen well to people in the Appalachian region, and other places that have suffered exploitation. Stoll provides connections to wider American perspectives on the land and frontier.

Chapter Six: The Captured Garden, Subsistence Under Industrial Capitalism

This chapter provides a series of incidents and perspectives describing life under the conditions framed in chapters 4 & 5. Stoll probes what it was like to live in a place stripped of much of what drew the people there. In terms of the hermeneutical question over “resource v. home,” this chapter probes how difficult it can be to honor “home” when so much damage is all around. At the same time, Appalachians were resilient and ingenious in their claim to make Appalachia home despite having been mined as a resource.

Chapter Seven: Negotiated Settlements, The Fate of the Commons and the Commoners

Returning to the language and longer history of enclosure, Stoll’s final chapter is an interpretation of what happened to Appalachia and critical commentary on some of the ways other observers portrayed it. Stoll wants you to know that inequality doesn’t simply happen over and over because poor people were somehow flawed in character, deficient in morals or truncated by genetics (each of those were rationalizations that showed up in the history of Appalachia). Stoll concludes with advice that can help anyone who wants to give room for “home” over-against “resource” in the struggle to name one’s place and what it is like to be you in the place God has called you to be and to serve.