



Reading Appalachia from Left to Right: Conservatives and the 1974 Kanawha County Textbook Controversy

Carol Mason

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In *Reading Appalachia from Left to Right*, Carol Mason examines the legacies of a pivotal 1974 curriculum dispute in West Virginia that heralded the rightward shift in American culture and politics. At a time when black nationalists and white conservatives were both maligned as extremists for opposing education reform, the wife of a fundamentalist preacher who objected to new language-arts textbooks featuring multiracial literature sparked the yearlong conflict. It was the most violent textbook battle in America, inspiring mass marches, rallies by white supremacists, boycotts by parents, and strikes by coal miners. Schools were closed several times due to arson and dynamite while national and international news teams descended on Charleston.

A native of Kanawha County, Mason infuses local insight into this study of historically left-leaning protesters ushering in cultural conservatism. Exploring how reports of the conflict as a hillbilly feud affected all involved, she draws on substantial archival research and interviews with Klansmen, evangelicals, miners, bombers, and businessmen, a who, like herself, were residents of Kanawha County during the dispute. Mason investigates vulgar accusations of racism that precluded a richer understanding of how ethnicity, race, class, and gender blended together as white protesters set out to protect "our children's souls."

In the process, she demonstrates how the significance of the controversy goes well beyond resistance to social change on the part of Christian fundamentalists or a cultural clash between elite educators and working-class citizens. The alliances, tactics, and political discourses that emerged in the Kanawha Valley in 1974 crossed traditional lines, inspiring innovations in neo-Nazi organizing, propelling Christian conservatism into the limelight, and providing models for women of the New Right.

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