

Working Without Nets: Early Twentieth Century Mountain Women in Fiction

by Gwen McNeill Ashburn

She [Eliza] had grown triumphantly stronger after the diseases of the middle years. White, compact, a great deal heavier now than she had ever been, she performed daily tasks of drudgery in the maintenance of Dixieland, that would have floored a negro. She hardly ever got to bed before two o'clock in the morning, and was up again before seven.

—Thomas Wolfe *Look Homeward, Angel*

Eugene Gant, the protagonist of *Look Homeward, Angel*, finds life difficult, blaming his mother, Eliza, whom he describes as demanding, insensitive, and cheap. Many readers, including my students, decide Eliza is an exact replica of Thomas Wolfe's mother, Julia, owner and operator of The Old Kentucky Home. Each time I hear such an analysis I cringe. It is true that Julia Wolfe, as her fictional counterpart Eliza is portrayed in *Look Homeward, Angel*, was a parsimonious businesswoman who worked tirelessly in a boarding house she owned and operated. And it is true Thomas Wolfe—growing up amid the traveling salesmen, lonely widows, surreptitious sufferers of tuberculosis or other ailments, without a place to call his own—found life irritating, no matter how much material it provided for his later fiction. However, I have no sympathy for Eugene Gant, Thomas Wolfe, or others who are eager to depict negatives in memoirs or fiction with their hard-working mothers. Through her labors—she was most likely uncheerful at times and worried about finances—Julia Wolfe accommodated travelers and boarders who needed a reasonable place to stay, provided thousands of meals to her paying guests, borrowed money to buy property, paid her bills, and sent her youngest, self-centered child to university and graduate school. She did all of this and more while raising a family of seven children, surviving the death of two, and enduring a difficult marriage to an embarrassing, Shakespeare-quoting alcoholic. Julia Wolfe and all women who have supported their families, mothered multiple children, done all the domestic work expected of women, while also having to work as hard or harder than men in boarding houses, farms and textile mills, should be admired rather than admonished. Yet even in the twenty-first century, many people fail to recognize the importance of women's work and their undocumented contributions to community and culture. Most Southern mountain women never had the means to be Southern Belles or Victorian ladies, pampered and protected. Rather they were much

too busy taking care of and providing for others. Gender boundaries neither protected them nor imprisoned them. Their worlds gave them no time to consider whether they had alternatives. Rather, their only choice was to do what had to be done, and they nor others bothered to document their efforts. Barbara Ellen Smith in “‘Beyond the Mountains’: The Paradox of Women’s Place in Appalachian History” notes how few sources there are about mountain women:

The history of women in Appalachia will not be discovered exclusively, perhaps even primarily, in the official documents of institutions, even those that they founded and shaped. Nor may women necessarily be located at “historic” events (a battle or strike, for example) that they influenced. Gender is a profoundly material relationship, but its bargaining table is often in the kitchen. The historical agency of Appalachian women, especially working-class women, is to be found as much in jokes, “old wives’ tales,” and fugitive actions as in the public events and records of conventional history. (9)

In addition to Smith’s limited list, I propose literary representations as sources of information about women. We know of a woman operating a boarding house in Asheville, North Carolina, in the early twentieth century because of Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*; there are no memoirs, historical records, or “old wives’ tales” that give such an inside view, as unflattering as it may be. In southern Appalachia, how did women balance work and demands of family? In what ways were their lives shaped by the numbing routine of farm and rural life? How did they adapt when their traditional ways of life no longer provided a model for living in towns and crowded mill villages? What forces propelled them away from the familiar landscape of subsistence farms? What made them endure the dirty, dangerous work in cotton mills? What was it like to have to make difficult moves, knowing there was no one under them to catch them if they failed?

In this study, I suggest two very different novels that provide striking answers to questions about women’s lives in Appalachia early in the twentieth century. *Call Home the Heart* by Olive Tilford Dargen and *Gap Creek* by Robert Morgan give readers insight into Barbara Ellen Smith’s words about “how women engaged in socially necessary activities—wage labor, farming, commerce, and so on—embedded, indeed hidden, within a gendered division of labor that allocated different tasks and status to women and men” (7-8). The two female protagonists in these novels are bound by family, farms, and work. Both live in a time of social turbulence and change when mills, banks, factories, and war were transforming social and cultural institutions, lessening allegiance to family and community, and further blurring divisions in male and female roles. Women were part of these changes yet historical records offer little information; fiction can fill that gap. Like Eliza Gant, Ishma in *Call Home the Heart* and Julie in *Gap Creek* emerge as determined, energetic, capable females. They are not Southern Belles, ladies with economically secure family and friends, kindly volunteers helping the community’s poor and elderly. By necessity, they are working women surviving by taking risks; determined and resourceful, they must fly or fail. Moving beyond traditional boundaries, these women worked as boarding house operators, cleaning, cooking, balancing the books; textile mill workers, weaving, spinning, raising children; vendors of home-grown goods and crafts, gardeners and tenders of livestock, so their families had clothing and food. They were resourceful risk takers, moving beyond the security of the familiar, working without safety nets; not all were successful, but they deserve recognition for their efforts.

Call Home the Heart, a 1932 novel by Olive Tilford Dargen published under the

pseudonym Fielding Burke, begins, "Before she was seven, Ishma, the youngest child of Marshall and Laviny Waycaster, had joined the class of burden-bearers." The first chapter illustrates what it means for the protagonist, Ishma, to be a "burden bearer" on a small mountain farm in Western North Carolina in the early years of the twentieth century. Ishma is an intelligent mountain girl who can read (her literate grandmother taught her), but her father dies when she is young, her mother is arthritic, her brother left home at sixteen to join the army, and her brother-in-law, the only male left in the family, is of little use. Thus, as an eighteen year old, she is the daughter and "son" who is now "almost single-handed in her struggle to make the farm keep them all decently alive" (13). Ishma, several years beyond when young men began longing for her company, is bound to a household where the "scale of living runs lower" (7) each year. She does almost all the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, washing and mending clothes, chopping wood, and hauling it in. But Ishma also must plant, hoe, and harvest, the laborious chores traditionally accomplished by males, if any are available. She does refuse to plow, forcing her hapless brother-in-law to take on that duty once she has prepared the field (15).

Like *Call Home the Heart*, Robert Morgan's *Gap Creek* (1999) brings readers into the life of a seventeen-year-old mountain woman confined by family, poverty, and the endless work of women living in the mountains of Western North Carolina at the turn of the century. In Chapter One of *Gap Creek* we hear from Julie: "Because Papa had the cough, my sister Lou and me did the heavy work outside. We got in eggs and fed the stock and carried in wood and water from the spring. I hated how everybody expected me to do the outside work. If there was a heavy job it just fell naturally to me . . ." (3). Julie's life helps us understand why many mountain women, like Ishma, would welcome leaving the farm to work in abhorrent conditions in Southern cotton mills. Julie is the strongest in her family; her sickly father dies after her only brother dies. Now, as she has done since she was a young child, Julie provides the labor for all the work usually done by a man, had an able one been around; she too must assume the role of "son." Cutting firewood, plowing, digging graves for the dead, Julie, like Ishma, does not choose to cross gender boundaries, but she must for there is no one else.

Dargan's and Morgan's protagonists are marginalized and impoverished through circumstances beyond their control. As Southern women without education and economic resources, they were expected to marry, have many children, carry out the domestic duties of wives and mothers, as well as participate in the grueling labor required by subsistence farming. In *Call Home the Heart*, Ishma's sister and her husband, Jim, have seven children in nine years and Jim is much better at procreation than he is feeding those whom he fathers. Ishma does marry with some thoughts of escaping the grinding poverty of her childhood, but her life does not improve. With a sickly child and a husband who is unable to offer security and well being, Ishma feels trapped. Frightened that no matter how hard she works she will end up like her sister, she makes the unthinkable choice to leave her family, following others who have gone to work in the textile mills. Ishma does not make this decision lightly: "She was as ready to work as ever, but she had to know that it was getting her somewhere. She couldn't go on this way, sliding back a little every year instead of getting out" (141). Dargan knew women such as Ishma, for she had bought a small farm in Almond, North Carolina, and moved there with her husband in 1906. Life was much harder in rural Western North Carolina than either were prepared for and neither she nor her husband was able to get much writing done, while enduring winter in the rugged, isolated mountains. By 1916, Dargan's infant daughter, and her husband, had died;

she traveled and lived away from the farm for a number of years. She returned alone and moved into a small cabin on her property, sharing it with a tenant family, a man, wife and their seven children.

There she began writing sketches about her rural life and the people who resided on her land and on nearby farms. These literary pieces entitled *Highland Annals* would be published in 1925—the sketches had appeared individually from 1919 to 1924 in *Atlantic Monthly*. (The collection would be reprinted in 1941 as *From My Highest Hill* with photographs by Bayard Wooten.) In one of these, entitled “Coretta and Autumn,” Coretta, wife of Sam, tells the first-person narrator,

We’re all goin’ to Georgia. Sam can git three dollars a day there. And he’ll have to work. Katy can keep house and ’tend to the younguns, an’ I’m goin’ to work too. We can make five an’ six dollars a day . . .

She talked on, but I shrank in panic, looking about me and counting the curly heads, as if already one might be missing.

Coretta, you can’t take these babies—

Oh I knowed you’d talk thataway. That’s why I couldn’t see you. But we’ve got to go. The tickets have been purchased an’ we’ve got to use ’em inside o’ two weeks. I’m worn out working on the farm like a man, an’ in the house too. We’ll never git a start here. (36)

Coretta, like, Ishma was modeled on a number of women whom Dargan lived near; Dargan was a close friend and supporter of several of them who lived on her farm as tenants. Many from the mountains, men and women, were targeted by advertisements, promising money, housing, and a way off the farm if they came to work in the mills.

Dargan’s characterization of mountain women and work is clearly influenced by her support of the emerging socialist movement and her years in England. By the time of her return to Swain County, North Carolina, Dargan was close friend and a supporter of women such as Rose Stokes and other feminist activists. She was increasingly sympathetic to the plight of working-class women and the poor, especially with their having no means of birth control.

The escalating labor unrest nationally and the series of management-worker conflicts in North Carolina mills in 1927 led to a bloody strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929. The successive wave of strikes affecting thousands of workers in North and South Carolina spurred Dargan and others to write of the increasingly difficult conditions in textile mills and the hardships faced by women and children. According to Kathy Ackerman in *The Heart of the Revolution*, “The strike at Gastonia was particularly relevant” to woman writers such as Dargan, Grace Lumpkin (*To Make My Bread*), Mary Heaton Vorse (*Strike!*) and Dorothy Page (*Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*) (79). Ackerman explains:

Unlike the male writers inspired by the same events, the women were able to recognize the special oppression of women mill workers and their children. The mill owned the houses in which workers lived, the size of the house depending upon the number of workers in a family. Children as young as nine or ten worked in the mills. Consequently, mill families tended to be large. Despite the mothers’ poor health or meager means to provide for more children, workers were kept ignorant of birth control, guaranteeing a perpetual labor force for the mill. (79)

Dargan’s protagonist Ishma abhors how detrimental millwork is for women and

their children taken out of school anytime there is a need in the mill. Ishma, already a controversial woman for leaving her husband and family, living with another man, and being relieved when her sickly daughter dies, becomes even more so. She realizes her childlessness is a blessing for she is stronger and healthier than many of the women in Winbury, the fictional Gastonia. Though she first resisted working in the mill, Ishma does so because she has no one else to support her, though she realizes she can barely make a living wage:

Once hired to work in a spinning room, she is proud of her strong hands and her ability to work quickly and without tiring, much to the dismay of others around her. She earned a voucher for two dollars her first week in the spinning room, six dollars the second week, and by the end of two months she draws twelve dollars a week. As her hands became more easily skillful, the machines became more sensitive and alive. They could kill, but they could create. That was their first, great function . . . She understood how the mill "got you," how the workers could say so pathetically, "I's like the life, if a feller could live." If they could live! That was all they seemed to be asking for. (273)

The union, having sent leaders from the North, finally succeeds in organizing a strike and the conditions in the town of Winbury become horrible for those evicted from the mill houses. Ishma's efforts are now directed at helping the strikers survive:

During those days of evictions she worked ceaselessly; up and down the streets, tramping with unbreaking faith the road of the "impossible." At the end of the week the tents arrived. Families could be sheltered . . . tents were speedily set up, and the evicted families moved into them. Thelma Rowe and Sue Shelton were not among them. Thelma was dead, and Sue was in an asylum. Their little children played around the tents, cared for by the women of the union. (327)

Moving from the traditional roles of mother, wife, and daughter in the North Carolina mountains to a woman embroiled in the struggle for decent wages and humane working conditions, Dargan's protagonist Ishma becomes educated in socialism and the plight of workers such as herself. She fails, though, in carrying through with her convictions and retreats at the end of the novel back to the mountains and the farm work she had left behind. Ishma leaves Winbury only when repelled by the violence and by her own prejudicial reaction to the black activists sent by the union and by her repulsion of being hugged by a black woman whose husband she has rescued from the Klan. Issues of class, racism, and economic injustice are too overwhelming for Ishma. She returns home disillusioned by the complicated world of a textile mill town and the seemingly merciless patriarchy of mill owners and supervisors, but she knows she can work hard wherever she lives. In 1935, Dargan, still very involved in the socialist movement, would write a second novel *A Stone Came Rolling* in which the protagonist once again leaves the safe roles to which she had returned to become part of the revolutionary activities of the mill workers.

Morgan's *Gap Creek* is the story of Julie Harmon, who, like Ishma, begins working hard as a young child. Julie also in the end returns home. She has matured and knows she and her husband have survived their first year of marriage mainly due to her hard work. The unforgettable opening chapter begins with Julie telling of the winter when the beloved younger brother becomes ill and the father's consumption worsens. She and her sister Lou have to do the outside work, and, as Julie brings in yet another load of firewood which she has chopped, her mother observes, "Julie can work like a man," to which Julie replies, "Somebody's got to work like a man" (4). The family

is poor, near starving and Masenier, the brother, becomes more ill. Thus, on a cold night Julie must go with her father and help carry the gravely ill brother down the mountain to see a doctor who lives in Flat Rock. On the return trip, uphill for four miles, Julie feels the boy's body stiffen, shudder, jerk spasmodically while she tries to keep him from swallowing his tongue. The boy dies, worms emerge through his mouth and nose, and Julie has to haul the body home. Life continues for twelve more chapters with Julie working all the while—Julie's work, her resentment of it, but her reliance on it as a saving grace, is a central theme of *Gap Creek*. Unlike Ishma, Julie does not question what can be changed about her life, but like Ishma she has a steely strength and determination to survive.

In explaining her role in the household with four daughters and a mother, Julie says she had always helped her father with the outside work in their rural mountain existence, but she adds, "But helping is one thing, and having to do it all yourself is another" (18). As a teenager, she worries her hands are rough and calloused, not the hands of a lady because of her working like a man. The teenaged Julie marries a handsome young man named Hank, expecting marriage to give her an escape from her laborious duties, but it does not work out that way. Instead Julie goes down the mountain to Gap Creek, an isolated community in South Carolina where her young husband works making brick for a new textile mill. They rent a room in an old man's house—a house that is disgustingly dirty. Julie waits on the lecherous landlord Mr. Pendergast, cooking and cleaning and washing clothes while Hank is away all day at his job. Julie longs for her mountain home and family at times, but tries not to romanticize her life there since it too was laborious. She rationalizes, "It was the thought of the work that cleared my head a little. If I was going to have to work so hard anyway, I might as well be working for Hank and myself. I might as well work where I was, now that I was down on Gap Creek" (57). In addition to her domestic labor made harder by her weekly duty of scrubbing nasty clothes and boiling them in a wash pot, Julie's work at Gap Creek includes butchering a hog with only Mr. Pendergast to help lift the hog on the scalding boards. A fire breaks out from cooking the grease and Julie then must nurse the badly burned Mr. Pendergast, who dies.

After the funeral, Julie reflects on life now that she is alone most of the day: "As I scrubbed the floor I was scrubbing part of the world. And I was my scrubbing my mind to make it clear. It was work that made me think clear, and it was work that made me humble" (122). Hank loses his job after several months and the couple has to figure out how to exist with no income and no crops planted. Here they differ, for Hank does not feel compelled to find employment or even to figure out how they are to eat through the winter. At one point Julie wonders why she is attracted to someone so unlike herself. Julie's mother had warned her "that marriage is like everything else; it is work, hard work" (48). The marriage survives but only barely when Hank and Julie's world nearly washes away in a flood at Christmas. And Julie of course is more burdened than ever: "I don't think I'd ever faced such a job as cleaning up Mr. Pendergast's house after the flash flood. Looking at the red mud on the floor and on the chair legs and table legs, and smelling the stench of wet wood and ashes, you just wanted to walk out of the house into the morning air and never come back" (229). Julie's life is grueling, but there never seems to be anything she can do except to keep working.

In January the cow dies, the chickens die, and Julie goes into labor while trying to pick cressie greens. She is alone when the baby is born; she becomes very ill, and despite all efforts the baby dies. In grieving for her child, Julie turns to work once again.

The more I worked the more I had to work . . . Every time I thought about Delia I worked that much harder. I mowed the grass on the bank by the road with the sling blade, and I trimmed back the briars and brush and big weeds. We didn't have enough money for shoelaces, but everything I done was free. The sweat was free as water from the spring, as air and sunlight . . . Time kept spilling down on me, and the only way I could take hold of the minutes and make sense of them was to work. (310-11)

Robert Morgan, who grew up on a farm outside Flat Rock in Western North Carolina, knew of Julie's life first hand. He describes living on a farm:

I am fascinated by work, by the process and psychology and ethos of work. But I am sure it also has something to do with the fact that I grew up on a small farm where work filled the day every day except Sunday. We were working people in the most literal sense. As a child I never knew anyone who took vacations or went away for holidays. Even on Sundays the cows had to be milked, the stock fed and watered, eggs gathered, the horse led out to the pasture. (Morgan, "Work and Poetry, the Father Tongue," 3).

Besides helping on the farm, Robert Morgan's mother also worked in a mill to earn money; his father as a farmer earned little cash. Morgan creates a character very different from the emerging socialist feminist Ishma. Julie does not question her plight; she knows that she must work under difficult circumstances. Nor does she imagine that in the future life for women will change. On the other hand, Dargan, seventy years earlier on the brink of an economic depression, created a protagonist who decides that life is unjust and that something must be done to improve the plight of women and children bound by so many oppressive constraints. Though neither novel provides sterling accounts of women and work, the juxtaposition of their varied perspectives is intriguing.

What knowledge do we gain about Southern mountain women after considering these two different novels with their young, burdened protagonists? Both novels illuminate the contradictory, paradoxical lives of many Southern women of the sort labeled plain people, yeoman farmers, poor whites. These women—and men—were never part of the plantation South dependent on slave labor. They struggled to remain independent and self-sufficient but were caught in an impoverishing cycle in the early twentieth century, a people and way of life far from the romanticized ideal of the yeoman farmer. Besides insights into the difficulties of life for women trying to exist on small farms in a time when subsistence farming was becoming obsolete, both depict how conflicted women were about work outside the home and how contradictory their quests for identity when their class and economic circumstances required them to work like men. Many women, such as Dargan's protagonist, would leave the laborious rural life, a life made painfully clear by Robert Morgan's protagonist, for the lure of wages, housing, and a better life for themselves and their families. Southern mills would provide mountain women work and a way off the farm but at a steep price.

Dargan and Morgan also help us understand that many women took risks venturing out from the safety of their families and farms, as stultifying as that environment may have been. They did not want to work but they did so knowing there would be little reward or recognition for how valuable or life-sustaining their work was. Though fictional, the stories of Ishma, Julie, and Eliza are important because we have few real accounts of Southern mountain women's work and little appreciation for what they accomplished. To label these characters as working or lower class, as farm women, as mill hands, as shiftless, underserving poor people who got what they deserved, obscures their struggles. Historical documents provide few eyewitness accounts, but

fiction can fill that void. In an article on Grace Lumpkin's career, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (*Journal of Southern History*, Feb 2003) observes:

Women's voices, in particular, often could not be heard above the din. Yet the cultural enfranchisement of marginalized people, the effort to overturn the structures of economic oppression, and the will to see how those structures were inflected not only by today's key categories---race, ethnicity, and gender---but also by class and region, these are worth rediscovering and bringing forward as our epoch "dreams the one to follow" and, in that dreaming, re-remembers the past. (17)

As we think of the past, we must remember that women have always worked and, though given little credit, their work is important. Though there are few records, we know there were Eliza Gants---determined to accrue property and to operate a business successfully no matter how much work it required. There were Julies who scrubbed clothes, killed hogs, scrounged for food and ginseng to sell when there was nothing to eat and no money to buy food or other goods. There were Ishmas in textile mills whose owners and managers showed no concern for their safety and well being. Despite the disgusting conditions, some women did succeed in working beside men rather than beneath them, and eventually someone did hear what they had to say. As providers and sustainers, they found work both oppressive and redemptive, but as their world changed, their work and their roles changed. Such daring and determination would eventually benefit all women. In the early twentieth century, working women had no safety nets of family and friends with the economic resources to catch them. They did not have the security of education nor the reassurance that women could be equally as successful as men in a world of work. Though neither Ishma nor Julie fully breaks away from the demands of family and the constraints of poverty in the rural mountains, they, like Eliza, succeed in crossing over into male roles of procurer and provider. As fictional characters based on real women, they foreshadow women who enjoy much wider expanses and more opportunities to fly higher and farther.

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