

MOUNTAINS

Ellison and McCue: Kephart brought them together

Your Turn

Frances Figart
Guest columnist

In 2019, George Ellison and Janet McCue won the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award for their “Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography” (2019, Great Smoky Mountains Association). They will be interviewed on a Lit Café Zoom meeting hosted by the Western North Carolina Historical Association on October 8.

Long before they met or even knew each other existed, both Ellison and McCue had been living with Horace Kephart for decades. Kephart essentially chose them, bringing them together to write his biography. How it happened is a fascinating tale. But first, a couple of introductions.

If you are a regular reader of the Asheville Citizen Times, you may have been reading George Ellison’s “Nature Journal” column since 1987. Ellison has been designated one of the 100 most influential people in the history of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and in 2012 he won the Wild South Roosevelt-Ashe award for Outstanding Journalism in Conservation. Books such as “Permanent Camp”—illustrated by his artist-wife Elizabeth Ellison—attest to the fact that Ellison is truly a writer’s writer.

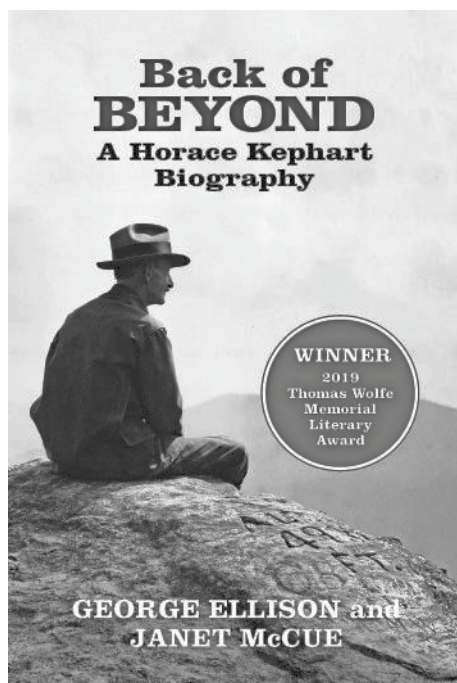
And so, it is only natural that much of his life has been devoted to studying another great writer, Horace Kephart, an enigmatic figure who came from St. Louis to live in the Smokies in 1904, and who still inspires admiration and awe, confusion and controversy. In graduate school at the University of South Carolina during the late 1960s, Ellison focused on the tradition of descriptive-humorous-sporting literature that flourished

in the Southern states in the 19th and early 20th century. He was intrigued with how Mark Twain took the basic ingredients found in these materials and in 1883 wrote an American classic, “Life on the Mississippi.” When Ellison discovered that Kephart’s two major publications, “Camping and Woodcraft” and “Our Southern Highlanders,” had carried that genre into the next century, he became increasingly curious about Kephart and started looking into his life and work.

At the same time, there was another Kephart scholar—working on her own, not from this region—and her interest was growing in tandem with Ellison’s. Living in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, Janet McCue first became interested in Kephart on a backpacking trip to the Smokies in the 1970s. A well-worn copy of “Camping and Woodcraft” inspired McCue and her husband to find the millstone marking Kephart’s Bryson Place campsite. A few years later, an assignment for a research methods course in graduate school led her to delve into Kephart’s early writings on librarianship.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1979, McCue was offered a position as an academic librarian at Cornell University, where Kephart had been a graduate student one hundred years earlier, in the 1880s. While reading a book about women in librarianship, she noticed a footnote citing a letter from Kephart to a fellow grad student at Cornell, Harry Lyman Koopman, which led her to a trove of letters at Brown University, where she uncovered many previously unknown details about Kephart’s early life.

Separated by 775 miles, Ellison and McCue followed parallel lines of inquiry,



unaware of each other’s research in the 1980s and ‘90s. Living in Bryson City, Ellison could absorb Kephart’s environment firsthand, mine the archives at Western Carolina University, and interview people such as Wilma McKan Ashe, who witnessed the scene of Kephart’s death. McCue’s initial research centered on Kephart’s professional and family life, his emotional breakdown, and the archives documenting these events at Cornell, Brown, and the St. Louis Mercantile Library.

In 2006, due to following their common obsession, Ellison and McCue both found themselves at the Calhoun House in Bryson City, attending Kephart Days, an event organized by Kephart’s great granddaughter, Libby Kephart Har-

grave. Once Ellison realized the extent of McCue’s study and that she had many of the missing puzzle pieces he had long been seeking, he invited her to join him in writing an introduction to “Camping and Woodcraft” (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2011). Their next joint endeavor would be co-authoring “Back of Beyond,” which would earn them the coveted Wolfe Award.

“George and Janet’s talents and life experiences mesh perfectly in helping bring Kephart to life,” wrote historian Daniel S. Pierce of UNC–Asheville in the book’s introduction. “George’s long-time immersion in what he calls ‘Kephartiana,’ his skills as a naturalist, writer, and poet, as well as 40-plus years living in the shadow of Kephart in Swain County—combined with Janet’s connections to Cornell and Ithaca, New York, her skills as a researcher and cataloger gleaned from a 34-year career as a librarian, and her love for and immersion in the outdoor life—make them the perfect pair to do a biography on this legendary librarian, outdoorsman, and literary figure.”

During the October 8 Zoom interview, the coauthors will read excerpts from the biography, share behind-the-scenes details about their research, provide insights into their writing process, and disclose mysteries of Kephart’s past still to be discovered. Learn more and register at wchistory.org/event/lit-cafe-back-of-beyond.

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Greenland lost 586 billion tons of ice in 2019

Seth Borenstein

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Greenland lost a record amount of ice during an extra warm 2019, with the melt massive enough to cover California in more than four feet of water, a new study said.

After two years when summer ice melt had been minimal, last summer shattered all records with 586 billion tons of ice melting, according to satellite measurements reported in a study Thursday. That’s more than 140 trillion gallons of water.

That’s far more than the yearly average loss of 259 billion tons since 2003 and easily surpasses the old record of 511 billion tons in 2012, said a study in Communications Earth & Environment. The study showed that in the 20th century, there were many years when Greenland gained ice.

“Not only is the Greenland ice sheet melting, but it’s melting at a faster and faster pace,” said study lead author Ingo Sasgen, a geoscientist at the Alfred Wegener Institute in Germany.

Last year’s Greenland melt added 0.06 inches to global sea level rise. That sounds like a tiny amount, but “in our world it’s huge, that’s astounding,” said study co-author Alex Gardner, a NASA ice scientist. Add in more water from melting in other ice sheets and glaciers, along with an ocean that expands as it warms – and that translates into slowly rising sea levels, coastal flooding and other problems, he said.

While general ice melt records in Greenland go back to 1948, scientists since 2003 have had precise records on how much ice melts because NASA sat-



After two years when Greenland’s summer ice melt had been minimal, last summer shattered all records with 586 billion tons of ice melting. FELIPE DANA/AP

ellites measure the gravity of the ice sheets. That’s the equivalent of putting the ice on a scale and weighing it as water flows off, Gardner said.

As massive as the melt was last year, the two years before were only on average about 108 billion tons. That shows that there’s a second factor called Greenland blocking, that either supercharges that or dampens climate-related melting, Gardner said.

In the summer, there are generally two factors in Greenland’s weather, Gardner said. Last year, Greenland blocking – a high pressure over Canada that changes the northern jet stream –

caused warm southern air to come up from the United States and Canada and flow into Greenland, forcing more melting.

In 2017 and 2018, without Greenland blocking, cooler Arctic air flowed from open ocean into Greenland, making summer milder, he said.

This year, Greenland’s summer melt has been not as severe, closer to normal for recent times, said Ruth Mottram, an ice scientist at the Danish Meteorological Institute, who wasn’t part of Sasgen’s research.

Mottram and several other outside scientists said Sasgen’s calculations

make sense. In her own study this month in the International Journal of Climatology, she found similar results and also calculated that Greenland coastal regions have warmed on average 3 degrees in the summer since 1991.

“The fact that 2019 set an all-time record is very concerning,” said New York University ice scientist David Holland, who wasn’t part of either study.

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