

IMMIGRATION AND DISTILLATION

A Review of *Spirits of Just Men*

by Katie Walsh



SPIRITS

WHAT DO MODERN MIGRANT FARMWORKERS in the South and Depression-era moonshiners in the Appalachian Mountains have in common?

Read *Spirits of Just Men*, Charles D. Thompson Jr.'s tale of the plight and might of mountaineer whiskey makers, and their struggles appear comparable.

Thompson has spent much of his life advocating for farmers and farmworkers. In *Just Men*, he traces his own roots back to Franklin County, Virginia, once known as the "Moonshine Capital of the World."

Illustrated with photographs of mountain farms, families working their liquor stills, and portraits of the author's own grandparents, the story Thompson tells is both personal and political. The intricacies of illegal liquor production raise questions about strong-armed federal policies, the institutional manipulation of poor and vulnerable populations, and the will to fight for survival even at the cost of the law.

"No one is proud that their family members broke the law of course, but those who have searched for answers know that the reasons people made liquor are more complex and nuanced than many first realize," he writes.

Thompson describes how Prohibition created a robust black market for bootleg whiskey. What's more, he exposes the Federal government's "eradication" strategy of going after the little guys rather than addressing the poverty and neglect that drove moonshining entrepreneurs in the first place. Thompson explains that moonshine is a value-added product. A gallon of moon brought more revenue to a struggling farm than a bushel of unprocessed corn.

It seems all too similar to modern anti-immigration law. Today's legislation has created an incredible market for cheap labor. It employs tactics like deportation, targeted detention and arrest, denied citizenry, and border fences. And all this without offering solutions for the issues that bring immigrants here to begin with.

G-men and liquor bosses in Franklin County built an enormous racketeering scheme in which they controlled the sale of mountain moon and collected regular bribes to "protect" its makers. Of the vast monies that poured in from illicit whiskey, next to nothing went to the moonshiners themselves.

One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another.



"They were caught between needing to make money and needing to keep quiet about it," writes Thompson. "This put them in a predicament of perfect vulnerability into which the unscrupulous could enter and take advantage. And they did."

Thompson shows the human side of the stereotypical lawless, backwoods moonshiner. He breathes life into the hard-pressed men fighting to keep their farms and feed their families.

One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another and eke out a living for his loved ones. *Just Men* invokes these present-day struggles as much as its historical ones. In between its pages' rich depiction of illicit whiskey in the "wettest section in the USA," the thought arises: As we debate how best to regard and treat the immigrant population in the United States, we could learn a lot from the lives and times of mountain moonshiners. 🍷

Katie Walsh is a Texas-based freelance writer and editor with a passion for food and all things cultural.

PHOTO, PAGE 11: Buffalo Trace Distillery, Frankfort, Kentucky. Photograph by Kate Medley.



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