

**The Mountain Man:  
A Mini-Biography of Byron Herbert Reece**  
by Kaitlin Griffin, Union County High School



Byron Herbert Reece was born near Blood Mountain September 14, 1917. He attended the Union County schools where he developed his love of writing. By the age of fifteen, his poems had been published in the local newspaper. Eventually Reece became the author of four poetry books and two novels. His poetry emphasized four major themes: nature, death, love and religion. Although his writing career was short-lived, he received great attention for his poetry. He earned two Guggenheim awards and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Tragedy struck Reece when his father became ill, his mother died of tuberculosis and he, too, contracted the disease. In his final years, Reece taught at Young Harris College to earn extra money. On June 3, 1958, he committed suicide in his campus apartment. When he was found, a Mozart sonata was playing on his record player and his final set of student papers lay graded in his drawer.

**NOTE:** This driving tour was originally compiled by students of Alan Denmon at Union County High School, Blairsville, GA. Minor editing and additions were made for this special edition prepared for the Georgia Literary Festival, Blue Ridge, GA September 28-30, 2007.

## Reece Ramble

Driving Directions with Reece Poems

### 1. Old Union County Courthouse to Vogel State Park

*Travel Hwy. 19/129 south from Blairsville for 10.1 miles. Vogel State Park is on the right. (approximate driving time: 12 minutes)*

As you drive south (uphill) toward Reece's birthplace, you will retrace the route he took to attend Union County High in Blairsville. A family story reports Reece's concern for a younger classmate.

He and she were left behind by the school bus while working on a school project. Reece walked quite some way out of his direct path home to make sure the young lady returned home safely. As you pass by Owltown grocery and the University of Georgia Mountain Experiment Station, you are entering Reece's beloved Choestoe community. Many of the farms you see while traveling toward Vogel State Park have been in the same families for decades—sometimes for over a century. The site where Reece was born in 1917 is now under Lake Trahlyta (Tra LYE tuh) at Vogel State Park. Blood Mountain is the high mountain located behind and to the left of the visitor's center. The family moved to a home further north down Wolf Creek valley in 1921. Lake Trahlyta was constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the mid-1930s.

### **Testament**

Since praise is parcel of their right  
And it were seemly of the mind  
To thank the donors of delight  
Whose gifts are tattle toned and hued  
That none who seek may fail to find,  
A testament of gratitude

I make to lovely things for thanks:  
The bloodroot of the March-wet wood,  
The yellow susan and the banks  
Of frosty asters and the rose  
Bleeding with bloom from every bud;  
And every broadening brook that flows

Vocal with pleasure from its spring,  
And choirs that shatter from the shell  
On boughs to congregate and sing,  
Song birds of every name and note,  
And sound of organ and of bell  
Clamoring from its iron throat;

And forms and colors, roseate, round,  
Curve, plane, refracted rainbow light,  
Halos and emanations bound  
To elder things, the phosphor ghost  
Escaping from old wood at night,  
And overhead the starry host;

Yea, every lovely thing I find  
Whether of earth or sea or air  
Crowding the doorway of my mind,  
Too numberless of name to call,  
For that your cumber is not care  
But beauty's own, I thank you all.

## **2. Vogel State Park to Reece Memorial**

*Turn right from Vogel onto Hwy. 19/129 south for 2.3 miles and turn right at the "Byron Herbert Reece" sign. The memorial was located on a large rock directly in front of the parking area. (approximate driving time: 3½ minutes) This memorial to Reece was created shortly after he died. The original plaque was stolen. The park now serves as a trailhead for the Appalachian Trail. Hikers can reach Flatrock Gap by traveling 0.7 miles on the side trail.*

### **I Go By Ways of Rust and Flame**

I go by ways of rust and flame  
Beneath the bent and lonely sky;  
Behind me on the ways I came

I see the hedges lying bare,  
But neither question nor reply.

A solitary thing am I  
Upon the roads of rust and flame  
That thin at sunset to the air.  
I call upon no word nor name  
And neither question nor reply  
But walk alone as all men must  
Upon the roads of flame and rust.

### 3. From Reece Memorial to Reece Farm & Heritage Center

*Turn left on Hwy. 19/129 and travel north 3.5 miles. The farm is on the left. Watch for the State of Georgia historical marker recently placed at the site (approximate driving time: 5½ minutes) This is the farm on which Reece spent most of his life. Here he built a house for his parents, and worked in the fields and forests. Reece often composed his work while working at the plow or other farm chores.*

#### The Pearl

I have a house of meager boards  
Furnished with such simplicities  
A miser or a monk affords.

My larder's space with lack is gaunt;  
From my own niggard fields I force  
A husky shield to ward off want.

When thirst is bitter in my mouth  
I lean to suckle from the earth  
Its crystal milk to quench my drouth.  
O well I know rich houses stand,  
And food is fat and wine is red  
On many tables in the land.

But lack has taught me to resign  
With grace the thing beyond my reach.  
I am content with what is mine.

Somewhere between the much I see  
And little may possess must lie  
Repletion, and this homily:

*Contentment is a pearl of price  
The heart may grow between its valves  
To cloak the sands of sacrifice.*

#### 4. Reece Farm & Heritage Center to Sunrise Grocery

*Turn left on Hwy. 19/129 for 0.9 miles. The store is on the left. (approximate drive time: 1½ minutes)* This store has been in existence since the 1920s. Reece certainly traded here many times. In the fall, the store has a large display of local produce.

##### **To Market, To Market**

At morning-shine and shadow-fall  
I see, through chill or April air,  
The maggot-mass of man repair  
To traffic at the Tradesman's stall  
And those go by with haughty tread  
Whose pockets clink with coin; but some  
Are beggars to life's market come  
With not a cent to buy them bread,  
And there is terror in their tread.

#### 5. Sunrise Grocery to Salem Church

*Turn left from Sunrise Grocery and travel on Hwy. 19/129 for 0.6 miles. Turn right on Hwy. 180 and proceed for 0.3 miles. Turn right on Twiggs Rd (which becomes Old Bald Mountain Rd.) and travel 0.3 miles. The church is on the left. (approximate drive time: 2½ minutes)* The route from Sunrise Grocery to Salem Church passes through the heart of Reece's Choestoe (ChOH-EE-stow-EE) community. Reece attended this church and occasionally served as a lay preacher when no minister was available. It was a Methodist church at the time, but is now called "Salem Open Bible Church."

##### **The Adoration**

If I but had a little dress,  
A little dress of the flax so fair  
I'd take it from my clothespress

And give it to Him to wear,  
To wear,  
And give to Him to wear.

If I but had a little girdle  
A girdle stained with the purple dye,  
Or green as grass or green as myrtle  
About His waist to tie,  
To tie,  
About His waist to tie!

If I but had a little coat,  
A coat to fit a no-year old,  
I'd button it close about His throat  
To cover Him from the cold,  
The cold,  
To cover Him from the cold.

If I but had a little shoe,  
A little shoe as might be found  
I'd lace it on with a sheepskin thew  
To keep His foot from the ground,  
    The ground,  
To keep His foot from the ground.

If my heart were a shining coin,  
A silver coin or a coin of gold  
Out of my side I'd it purloin  
And give it to Him to hold,  
    To hold,  
And give it to Him to hold.

If my heart were a house also,  
A house also with room to spare  
I never wouls suffer my Lord to go  
Homeless, but house Him there,  
    O there,  
Homeless, but house Him there.

## **6. Salem Church to Souther Mill**

*Turn left from Salem Church and travel on Old Bald Mountain Rd for less than 0.1 miles. The mill site and memorial are on the right. (approximate drive time: 15 seconds)* The mill is no longer standing, but the Souther family recently erected a memorial on the road near the mill site. This was the nearest mill to Reece's house, so he probably had his corn ground there.

### **The Laboring Man**

He that pays the spade respect  
Because he's paid it honest salt  
Has good reason to reject  
The easy ode and hold at fault

The lyric welling lightly up  
Without the windlass, as it can.  
He likes some blood into his cup;  
He bows to none but the laboring man.

God beheld him as he toiled  
Because he dreamed His eye in space  
To see him tired and see him soiled  
And see the worry on his face.  
Now when he sings it seems as if  
There is nothing easier than  
Song; and yet his mind grows stiff  
From singing for the laboring man.

Poet of curds and cuff of silk,  
Men read the absence of the sun  
Upon your countenance of milk.  
Return; your labor is not done  
Until redone in homespun shirt.  
When you have gone and come again  
If your hands and heart are hurt  
You may sing for the laboring man.

Because it is your grievous fault  
To praise the flag and not the staff  
Your bed of rose is brined with salt  
That else had flowered your epitaph.  
He that was shadowed by your sun  
Moves from your wake into the van,  
And he begins when you are done,  
He the doubly laboring man.

## **7. Souther Mill to Trackrock Gap**

*(For an optional side trip at this point, see below.) Proceed on Old Bald Mtn. Rd. for 0.6 miles. Turn left on Hwy 348 (Russell Scenic Highway) and travel less than 0.1 miles. Turn right on Hwy. 180 and travel for 1.4 miles. Turn left on Town Creek School Rd. and travel for 2.1 miles. Turn right on Trackrock Church Rd. and remain on this road until it dead-ends in 3.0 miles. Turn right on Trackrock Gap Rd. A parking area and short hiking trail to the archaeological site are located on the left at 0.7 miles. (approximate drive time, 12 minutes) Reece traveled through this gap to reach Young Harris College. The gap also contains a Native American archaeological site.*

### **Astronomics**

We dwell, not strangers to the earth  
But intimates of spheres  
That constellate around a hearth  
But solitary bears  
Each its equal progeny,  
Its populating one  
The circuit set for solar day  
By its elected sun.  
While passing planetary here  
Fortunate they are  
Proficient as astronomer  
To gauge a single star

And fathom how benign its air,  
How mild its zones, and then  
By implication, as it were,  
Deduce the citizen.

### 7a. Souther Mill to Brasstown Bald (optional side trip)

*Proceed on Old Bald Mtn. Rd. for 0.6 miles. Turn left on Hwy 348 (Russell Scenic Highway) and travel less than 0.1 mile. Turn right on Hwy. 180 and travel for 6.0 miles. Turn left on Hwy. 180 Spur. You will reach a parking lot after 3 steep miles. Visitor center is reached by hiking 1/2 mile on a paved trail or taking the seasonal van shuttle. (fee) (approximate drive time: 14 minutes)*

**From Brasstown Bald to Trackrock Gap:** *Travel down the mountain on Hwy. 180 Spur for 3.0 miles. Turn right on Hwy. 180 and go 4.6 miles. Turn right on Town Creek School Rd. Follow the directions from there as listed in #7. (approximate drive time: 13 minutes)*

Brasstown Bald is the highest mountain in Georgia, rising to 4,784 feet. Reece certainly visited the mountain during his lifetime. The present visitors' center was constructed by the U.S. Forest Service in 1966/ 67. Legend has it that some of the rocks used in its construction were taken from the chimney of the home of Rev. John Lance, Reece's maternal great-grandfather, who was murdered by moonshiners. The visitors' center offers outstanding views of the mountains and valleys that Reece knew and loved; it also contains an interesting museum.

#### Choestoe

It's not that rabbits ever really danced here,  
Though sometimes in the dusk when nothing happens  
We could believe they danced and wish them dancing.  
They came to sport forever in the name  
Our country bears, one that the Indians gave it.  
Rather it is because the Cherokees,  
Coming to fish along the Nottley River,  
Found them so plentiful that in their fashion,  
Naming a country after what was found there,  
Gave it its name, a dancing place of rabbits.

The rabbits vanished, almost, with the Indians.  
Hunters stalking through deserted bottoms  
May scare them out; and if they are no dancers  
They're runners surely, almost swift as buckshot!  
Indeed, one day, when I was rabbit-legged  
And had my first gun proudly on my shoulder,  
We routed from a ditch a pair of rabbits.  
My father missed (I never thought of shooting).  
When I asked why: "I didn't, Son, I didn't,  
The shot went true, the rabbit just outruns it,  
It may catch up with him by the next hollow!"  
But if they go they never can escape us  
(Not as the Indian, vanished and his arrows  
Hid in the field and shattered by the plowshare)  
We have them captured in our name forever.

What does a land resemble, named for rabbits?  
As seen from Blood it seems to be all mountain;  
Not like the Alps of course, if you think upward  
A mile the mountains cluster all below you.

Not like Kentucky either, there the Georgian  
Walks with a lean, as if to keep from falling.  
Our ridges roll; they're not in such a hurry  
To reach a valley that they take a short-cut  
And race straight down.

It's not all mountain, really.  
You ask a farmer what about his acreage:  
"Two lots," he says, "a hundred-sixty acres."  
That's what he owns; he tills but forty acres,  
The trees take care of the remainder for him.  
Our land is lean except by watercourses;  
The fat fields all hug close to Nottley River,  
As children should by any generous parent.  
Our streams are swift; we have no placid water  
Because the earth tilts to incline its hurry.  
But Wolf Creek takes time out from hurried flowing  
In times of flood when it feels generous  
To add a little to the store of richness  
Of fields it made when man was in the ocean.  
(If that is where he came from in the first place,  
To tell us that you'd have to call it Eden!)

This is a place of people, not of rabbits.  
Had you gone walking here but yesterday  
And met, perhaps, a man behind a wagon,  
Partly beguiled by its eternal clucking  
To a half sleep, he would have told you howdy  
In the same accent as his ancestors.  
Still, his is not a life within a country  
A man could walk around with the same walking  
It takes to mend his fence for several seasons.  
He is not four days on the road to market,  
A hundred miles there and back together,  
Sleeping, in winter, in his covered wagon  
Or thinking how, the hours he should be sleeping,  
To keep the cold from seeping through his bedding  
And rising on him like a growth of water.  
He does not make his shoes, with pegs of maple  
To keep the soles from giving up the uppers,  
But buys them sight unseen from Sears and Roebuck.  
His mother may have spun and wove and carded,  
His wife buys all her cloth across the counter,  
Or ready-made in Gainesville, or Atlanta.  
His father had, for all his education,  
Old Noah Webster's text, the Blue Back Speller,  
Davies' Arithmetic to teach him numbers  
And a reading text of strays from many authors.  
His son will have six textbooks in one season.

(And when they have him thoroughly confused  
They'll turn him out and call him educated.)

But man has danced here scarcely more than rabbits,  
Only the damned (the good are leaden-footed)  
And the young, because to let them sin a little  
Makes them a harvest worthier the gleaning,  
Makes it more sport to snatch them from the devil  
In God's high festival, protracted meeting.

But that is not to say we have no diversions,  
For there is always talk and politics.  
(The only famous sons our land has fathered  
Darken the doors of the State Capitol.)  
And really our land is full of poetry,  
Though we'll not make a poet by intention  
To talk of iambs, rhyme and anapests.  
Philosophers we have here by the dozens,  
One at each mill and leaner at every counter.  
I have in mind what one of them has told me:

"We're not so much of the hills as living in them.  
Our likes are those of folks in Philadelphia,  
We read the books from New York, Paris, London;  
Old Henry Ford has set our feet to itching  
For far-off places. Still we are different  
Because we have our lore, our superstitions,  
Our tales that live a neighbor to history---  
No one else knows them; thus we are a people."

Yes,  
Sprung from the hard earth, nurtured by hard labor.  
We know the names that built the fallen dwellings  
Going to ruin in old dooryard orchards.

And it has seemed to me by Slaughter Mountain  
Deep in a cove where noon is always twilit,  
Our land is summer leaves distilling bird-song.  
There is a magic in the way the light falls  
Upon the broad leaves of the corn in summer,  
Upon the herds grass in the autumn meadows  
Whose seeded heads seem on a dewy morning  
To rise like slow smoke from a hidden burning.  
There is peace here, quiet and unhurried living,  
Something to wonder at in aged faces;  
These are not all I mean but symbols for it,  
A thing, if one but has the spirit for it,  
Better, I say, than many rabbits dancing.

## 8. Trackrock Gap to Young Harris College

*From the parking area, turn left on Trackrock Gap Rd. and proceed for 2.1 miles until it dead-ends. Turn right on Hwy. 515/76 and travel for 2.0 miles. Young Harris College is located on the right. (approximate drive time: 6 minutes)* Reece attended the college and taught here on several occasions. He committed suicide in his apartment in Peel Hall, which is no longer standing. Duckworth library has an outstanding collection of Reece's works, manuscripts, his personal library, and paintings inspired by photos of Reece.

### **There Never Was Time**

I wish, he said, the years would linger  
And fly less fast to make me old;  
My face is a mask that time's swift finger  
Models, moulding wrinkle and fold  
In sagging flesh youth fashioned true  
To the ageless image, engraved on brass,  
Of a young face Rome or Athens knew.  
(There was time for youth to pass.)  
Time had a long look when I was twenty;  
Was there anything I had not done  
And yet would do? Well, there was plenty  
Of daylight left in the cycling sun.  
The roughs of knowledge that wanted scaling  
Loomed-there was time to be a sage;  
Time and to spare to heal all ailing.  
(And time enough for a man to age.)

But now the night that has no breaking  
Shadows the sun gone down the west,  
And my heart in its damaged cage is aching  
After lost years, too brief at best.  
I know a journey that yet wants going,  
I know a song that is still to sing,  
I know a fallow that waits the sowing-  
(There never was time for everything.)

## 9. Young Harris College to Old Union Church

*Turn left from Young Harris College and travel west on Hwy. 515/76 for 0.7 miles. Old Union Church is on the left. Drive past the church sign and turn into the second entrance to the circular drive. A gravel pathway is located on the left about 20 yards up the circular drive. Follow this pathway into the cemetery until the gravel ends. Reece is buried on the left near his parents Juan (pronounced locally as "Joo-an") and Emma and his sisters Jean and Eva Mae. (approximate drive time: 1¼ minutes)*

### **Three Times Already I Have Outwitted Death**

Three times already I have outwitted death;  
He came to me first when I was a tender age  
But I tore his hand from my mouth to drink in breath;  
And again when winter was whirling in windy rage

He touched my lips with fingers blue as an aster  
But could not stop my breath from coming and going;  
And again he followed me fast, but I ran faster,  
Out of the sea before the tide's inflowing.

Again and again will death prove troublesome;  
He in his proximate passing will pluck at me  
And I evade his grasp. But the time will come  
When he will creep upon me and I not see,  
Then he will pluck my life, as a leaf from a tree  
Between the wind's keen, cold forefinger and thumb.

### **10. Old Union Church to Old Union County Courthouse**

*Turn left from Old Union Church and go west on Hwy. 515/76 for 7 miles. Turn left at the second traffic light and follow Young Harris St. for 0.4 miles. Turn left on Harlson Drive. The old courthouse is directly in front of you. (approximate drive time: 10 minutes)* This courthouse, finished in 1899, was in use during Reece's life. It now houses a museum which includes some Reece memorabilia, displays about local life during Reece's lifetime, and even a model of a flying machine patented in the 1870's by a Choestoe pioneer.

#### **Roads**

A pace or two beyond my door  
Are highways racing east and west,  
I hear their busy traffic roar,  
Fleet tourists bound on far behests  
And monstrous mastodons of freight  
Passing in droves before my gate.  
The roads would tow me far away  
To cities whose extended pull  
They have no choice but to convey;  
I name them great and wonderful  
And marvels of device and speed,  
But all unsuited to my need.

My heart is native to the sky  
Where hills that are its only wall  
Stand up to judge its boundaries by;  
But where from roofs of iron falls  
Sheer perpendiculars of steel  
On streets that bruise the country heel  
My heart's contracted to a stone.  
Therefore whatever roads repair  
To cities on the plain, my own  
Lead upward to the peaks; and there  
I feel, pushing my ribs apart  
The wide sky entering my heart.

## 11. Old Union County Courthouse to Graypelle Mock House

*Travel south from the courthouse on Hwy. 19/129 for 0.1 miles. The house is on the left. (approximate drive time: 30 seconds)* Grapelle Mock taught school in Union County while Reece was a student. Her beautifully restored house, built in 1906, is now an annex to the main museum at the old courthouse. Several other historic buildings have been moved to the site. Note that Reece's writing studio is temporarily located behind this house, until progress at the Reece Farm and Heritage Center allows it to be restored to its original home.

### Ballad Of The Weaver

Old Margot, the weaver,  
Grows slow at the loom  
As the thread flies over  
The shuttle of doom.

Her fingers have guided  
The pearly wool thread  
Her house keeps alone.  
He rode from her humming  
A tune full of tears;  
And she waited his coming  
And counted the years

That she had waited,  
And he not come,  
Till five had freighted  
Each finger and thumb.

She speaks through the whirring  
Of shuttle and thread,  
And the cat, on hearing,  
Has lifted his head:

"The thread is thinning;  
My shroud is spun;  
The weaving and spinning  
Are over and done!"  
The thread of her will  
Has snapped in the loom;  
Her foot has grown still  
On the treadle of doom

### 11a. Mock House to Nottely Dam (optional side trip)

*From the Mock House, turn right on Hwy. 19/129 and travel north for 9.2 miles. (There are several turns in Blairsville—follow signs carefully.) Turn left on Hwy. 325 at the traffic light and proceed for 1.8 miles. Hwy. 325 crosses the dam. There is a small parking area and an information sign on top of the dam. (approximate drive time: 14 minutes)* This dam, completed in 1942, is the only dam in Georgia built by the Tennessee Valley Authority. (The other TVA dam in Georgia, Blue Ridge Dam, was purchased by the TVA from an existing power

company.) Reece mentions the dam's impact on the community in a letter to his friend Philip Greear: "The TVA Dam, I spelled it that way on purpose, has about moved all my students away."

**THE HILLS NOT HOME**

In the hour of evening  
I have come  
To a green-cool haven  
In the hills not home.

A rabbit and a squirrel  
And a dawn-colored doe  
Are playing in the laurel  
Where the blue winds blow.

And I am happy  
That I have come  
To a green-cool haven  
In the hills not home.

**11b. Nottely Dam to Mt. Zion Church (optional side trip)**

*Turn right from the Nottely Dam parking area and travel on Hwy. 325 for 1.5 miles. (approximate drive time: 2½ minutes)*

Reece taught at Mt. Zion School in the early 1940s. He is listed in a 1941 Union County Board of Education record book as Herbert B. Reece. The school building, which is no longer standing, was located near the church.

**WHOSE EYE IS ON THE SPARROW**

I saw a fallen sparrow  
Dead upon the grass  
And mused to see how narrow  
The wing that bore it was.

By what unlucky chance  
The bird had come to settle  
Lop-sided near the fence  
In sword grass and nettle

I had no means to know;  
But this I minded well:  
Whose eye is on the sparrow  
Shifted, and it fell.

**For additional information on Byron Herbert Reece visit  
[Byronherbertreecesociety.org](http://Byronherbertreecesociety.org)**