

A Review of Hillbilly Elegy

September 2017

I read J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy – A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. I had seen previews, promotional announcements and that sort of thing and had trepidations about the approach he likely had taken for his work. It exceeded my worst concerns. Why would I say that?

Perhaps a 'compare and contrast' approach might clarify. I had read Jim Webb's *Born Fighting – How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* and was impressed enough with it to read it twice. In fact it influenced my writing and ultimate formation of my character, David Wexley in the last book of my 19th century American trilogy. He was a character in all three of these historical novels but in this last, he spoke to us in the first person, befitting this linear novella. He was Scots-Irish.

I am Scots-Irish. James Webb is Scots-Irish. J.D. Vance is Scots-Irish.

Vance indicated he was born in the 1980's during the Reagan administration. James Webb was born in 1946. I was born in 1942.

Among the Scots-Irish hill people, there is the pre-FDR spirit of individualism, self-reliance and independence and the post-FDR view of dependence, entitlement and self-interest – history. Vance is too young to see the bigger picture and, more importantly, the longer picture. He never mentions the centuries of history that formed the character of Appalachian people.

Vance was a Marine and earned a law degree from Yale Law School. After that he married and practiced law, but not much else is known. He is still young. He expends many of his words humbly describing his personal greatness for rising from poverty. This had little to do with Hillbillies. It could have been any poor group in America.

Webb was a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, a Marine officer, an American politician and author. He was a U.S. Senator from Virginia, Secretary of the Navy, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, a recipient of the Navy Cross for heroic action as a Marine Lieutenant in the Vietnam War. He has authored several fictional novels, while *Born Fighting* is his first non-fiction work.

I worked a lifetime as an electronics engineer beginning in 1962 as an ELINT research technician, under DOD contract, during the Cold War before Vietnam became fully engaged. After retirement, I re-entered college for American Studies, majoring in history and literature. I have written eight books, four novels and four non-fiction.

No one has heard of me. I am uncertain if Webb was a “#1 New York Times bestseller” and Vance is. That accolade signifies nothing other than that the writer spent sums of money on marketing or is a celebrity for some reason other than writing. The quality of writing and ideas expressed are a thing apart from that medallion.

In any case, I value my Scots-Irish ancestry, as does Jim Webb. There is a heartfelt understanding about our history entwining with American history. There is a deserved pride worn together with the poverty and suffering. Vance writes little of our history and even gets it wrong about which century we arrived as immigrants. He underscores our bad points as witnessed from his own family, but has little good to say about us.

This was what I was afraid of when I read the previews.

Vance cares about his family, but not his culture, its heritage or its history outside his family. This was a good book, but not a great one.