Chapter One

Landscape of Memory

The Orchard Keeper (1965)

The Orchard Keeper is set primarily in a partially fictionalized but often geographically and topographically accurate southeastern Knox County and northeastern Blount County, Tennessee—in the area near Brown Mountain and the town of Vestal, where Cormac McCarthy, born Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., lived with his family when he was a child. Knoxville, to the north, would become the primary setting of Suttree, and Sevier County, to the east, is the setting of Child of God. These three novels seem consciously designed to exploit, in sequence, his familiarity with the Tennessee locales in which he lived or attended school between the 1930s and the 1960s. Suttree is a novel of urban life; Child of God emphasizes the main character’s anachronistic life in a near-wilderness situation; and the setting of The Orchard Keeper mediates between the two. Its characters both resist and benefit from modern technology: Marion Sylder and John Wesley Rattner travel with ease between the traditional community of Red Branch and the city, and Arthur Ownby, the oldest of the three, lives contentedly in Red Branch but feels the encroachment of modern life most. “If I was a younger man,” he thinks longingly, “I would move to them mountains” (55); when the government hounds him, he does just that, dragging his sledge with his meager belongings on foot south and east across Chilhowee Mountain in hopes of settling in the Hurricane, an old logging camp just outside of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Blount County (History of Blount County 5, 11).1 His retreat toward the mountains marks his choice of nature, traditional mountain culture, and personal freedom over civilization, modern technology, and governmental regulation. It is also an informed retreat to the lost world of his youth. But the tragic resolutions of his and Sylder’s narrative arcs leave both of them imprisoned in the city and the world of modern bureaucracy. McCarthy’s first novel establishes metaphorical implications for Knox, Blount, and Sevier counties, then, that remain fairly consistent across his Tennessee works and that largely reflect the socio-geographical reality of mid-twentieth-century East Tennessee. The physical move toward the mountains always signifies a movement toward the primitive and toward
Landscape of Memory

the past. In *The Orchard Keeper*, Blount County is a liminal space that mediates geographically and culturally between the urban and the wild, manifesting elements of both.

Despite its physical location near Knoxville, Red Branch is not suburban, nor was the area where the McCarthy children grew up on Martin Mill Pike at its intersection with Neubert Springs Road near Vestal, an area that had more in common with rural Blount County than with Knoxville. The Tennessee Historical Records Survey indicates that in 1940, the time in which sections II and III of the novel are set, the whole of Blount County had a population of only 41,116, up from 33,981 in 1930 following a decade of rapid expansion driven by such factors as the advent of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Its economy was predominantly agricultural, with a farming population of 16,787 in 1935, nearly all Caucasian; most farms were under one thousand acres in size. Maryville, the county seat west of Vestal from which Kenneth Rattner moves his family in the Depression year 1933, was Blount’s largest town but still just a village by absolute standards. Her population grew from 4,958 in 1930 to 5,609 in 1940 (Tennessee Historical Records Survey 12). With Alcoa Aluminum and the Knoxville Municipal Airport nearby, Maryville has continued to grow, but the area near McCarthy’s boyhood home has not been transformed by suburban sprawl—even today it retains its pastoral and semi-developed feel.

The biographical sketch provided on the dust jacket of the first edition indicates that McCarthy “grew up in a rural area similar to that described in *The Orchard Keeper*.” Edwin T. Arnold has photographed the old McCarthy house and its rural surroundings, and he and others have identified some likely local analogues to key sites in the novel (Arnold, “World” 7). South of the former McCarthy home on Martin Mill Pike, a dirt road branches off, leading to an abandoned orchard and some fenced-off TVA property (Arnold, “World” 5, 7). In a letter to the editor of *Metro Pulse* in response to Mike Gibson’s article about East Tennessee locales in McCarthy’s works, Frank E. Bourne of Knoxville writes that on Brown Mountain (which in McCarthy’s novel became Red Mountain) stands a five-hundred-thousand-gallon water tank still in working condition after one hundred years, a tank he associates with the government installation in *The Orchard Keeper*. In the woods near the McCarthy house is an old rectangular pit, which may have influenced McCarthy’s conception for the spray pit where Rattner’s corpse lies (Arnold, World” 7). McCarthy’s boyhood friend Jerry Anderson believes that some of the book’s details and incidents reflect the adolescent experiences of McCarthy and himself with two other friends, Hugh Winkler and Jerry Reed. He recalled that “on one occasion, the boys were roaming a thicket of honeysuckle when they spotted a green-striped frog, a turtle, and a pit four feet deep and bottomed with green slime[,] which
had been excavated so as to allow the orchard’s caretakers a natural vat for mix-
ing insecticides” (Gibson 26). On Neubert Springs Road, not far from the
McCarthy house, stood a country store built in the early 1900s. “According to
locals, a boarder who roomed with a boy named Warn Smith and his mother
would come into Doyle’s store once a week, on Fridays, remove his socks and
buy a new pair to last him for seven days more, just as Marion Sylver does”
(Arnold, “World” 5). Other nearby locations that figure in the book are Bay’s
Mountain Road, where Constable Jefferson Gifford lives, and the Green Fly
Inn, reputed to have been on Brown Mountain (Arnold, “World” 5; Gibson
26). Indeed, in a tour Wesley Morgan conducted for the 2004 Cormac
McCarthy Society’s conference in Knoxville, he demonstrated that much of
the activity in and around Red Branch in The Orchard Keeper can be superim-
posed on the actual roadways and terrains near McCarthy’s home. Like John
Wesley’s, McCarthy’s boyhood activities in this environ included hunting and
trapping, sleeping on the screened porch in summer, and escaping the house at
night to roam the countryside. And his next-door neighbor, Homer Garland
Winkler, who was probably the father of McCarthy’s friend Hugh, sometimes
took young Cormac hunting with him, accompanied by his dogs Buster and
Scout (Arnold, “World” 4–5; “Winkler, Homer”).2

Consuming the Wilderness: Dispossessing the Mountain People
In his essay “Commercial and Industrial Trends since 1865,” local historian
C. P. White identifies four phenomena that by the mid–twentieth century had
made the greatest impact on the economy of Knox County and East Tennes-
see: the opening of the Alcoa Aluminum plant fifteen miles south of Knoxville near
Maryville; the establishment of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park in
southern Blount and Sevier counties; the advent of the TVA, headquartered in
Knoxville; and the development of atomic energy facilities at Oak Ridge north-
west of Knoxville in Roane and Anderson counties (224). Of these four factors,
the first three had an immediate effect on Blount County. Characteristically
McCarthy makes no fictional use of the particular industrial company, Alcoa,
but The Orchard Keeper alludes pointedly to the other two: the national park and
the TVA. Indeed Blount County’s economic history and the drastic changes
that wrenched East Tennessee into the modern world lie behind much of the
novel’s depiction of the conflict between the mountain culture and the progres-
ssive order. In 1946, two years before John Wesley’s return to Red Branch,
Harvey Broome wrote that the entire history of the white settlement of the
area, “from the rude palisading at Fort Loudoun to the radioactive piles at Oak
Ridge,” had occurred within a mere nineteen decades: “Few regions, any-
where, have moved so rapidly from primitive conditions. When Knox County
was organized this was a land of primeval forests, of high barrier mountains,
and of unbridged rivers with almost impassable shoals. . . . Scarcely more than one hundred years ago, the people were burning coal for the first time; ninety years ago they were witnessing the arrival of the first train. . . . Fifty years ago horse-cars were plying the streets of Knoxville. Thirty years back the County was pouring rock into the mud and mire of its roads to make way for the automobile; and only twenty years ago, the County Court was first extolling the glories of the Great Smoky Mountains” (359). When they moved from the Northeast in 1937, the McCarthy family was part of the new order of outsiders arriving in East Tennessee to marshal in abrupt modernization, and young Cormac (or Charlie, as his family and friends called him then) observed firsthand the developments of the final decade Broome addresses and absorbed at second hand the reminiscences of the older residents who had lived through more of this change.

Arthur Ownby, born in 1857 or ’58, remembers eight of these decades. His history captures indirectly much of the fate of both the mountain dwellers and the forested wilderness of Blount County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the economic history of the region goes far toward illuminating the antinomian attitudes of Ownby and Sylder. Donald Edward Davis’s environmental history of the southern mountains offers a particularly relevant discussion of the post–Civil War period of land speculation in the southern Appalachians, when “politicians, businessmen, and prominent journalists promoted the region as a New South mecca, encouraging northern capitalists to exploit the mountains’ remaining mineral and timber reserves” (163). Less dispassionately, in his 1948 two-volume history of the Tennessee River, Donald Davidson, a Southern Agrarian, assessed what these “benevolent agents of Progress” meant to the traditional cultures of the South and revealed how they were viewed by some Tennesseans. The northern capitalists were “subtle utopians . . . who came bringing plentiful cash or credit and often enough large funds of honest good will. Their great armies had ruined the country, but now, come to think about it, they did not hate the southern people. . . . They begged to be permitted to assist in the humane task of restoring the devastated regions. . . . While offering the genial right hand of fellowship and reconciliation, they thought it only common sense to point out that the rebuilding of railroads, the exploitation of mineral and timber rights, and the development of manufacturing might be so arranged as to confer mutual benefits” (2:147–48).

Before 1870, around Ownby’s twelfth year, the remoteness of the area had discouraged lumber barons from venturing into the mountains of East Tennessee, but the advent of railroad lines there and the dwindling timber reserves in the North and the Midwest led to the era of industrial railroad logging, “the single greatest human activity to affect environmental and cultural change in the southern Appalachians” (Davis 165–66). The railroad logging industry,
which would reach maturation by the 1880s, had already begun in the mid-1870s, when Arthur Ownby was a young man hoping to support a wife and baby on the way. He grew up in Tuckaleechee (59), one of the old coves in the mountainous region of eastern Blount County, just outside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park area and east of the “Harrykin” where Ownby plans to hide from the authorities. In the late nineteenth century, Tuckaleechee was the site of several prerailroad logging operations. Its locale was a practical one for logging before the advent of the railway because the timber could be floated down the Little River to mill at Rockford (Carberry, “Blount County” section). The Little River Lumber Company, an offshoot of a northern company, was chartered there in 1901, and it began buying timberland in both Blount and Sevier counties, ultimately obtaining over seventy thousand acres. The company was led by a powerful executive, Col. W. B. Townsend, who was “sent south to breathe life into the new enterprise.” In 1903 Tuckaleechee was renamed Townsend for him, and it is still known by that name (Gentle Winds 114). Associated with the lumber company was the Little River Railroad, chartered at the same time, which in 1903 began to construct rail connections to the Knoxville and Augusta Railroad not far away, in Walland, Tennessee (Carberry, “Blount County” section; Gentle Winds 118).

Thus Ownby’s childhood home would not have become associated with industrial railroad logging until the early twentieth century, and it is not in Tuckaleechee but in nearby Wear’s Valley in Sevier County that he works on a railroad crew in 1876 or ’77, blasting into the mountains to construct railbeds (151). At the same time, he cultivates a little twenty-acre “side-hill” farm five miles west of Sevierville because neither occupation is very profitable (152). Davis records that logging in the southern Appalachians offered at best subsistence wages. Although the national average was nearly 20 cents per hour, the average North Carolina logger worked a 62.7-hour week and earned only 12 cents an hour (177). Statistics for the Tennessee side of the mountains were likely similar, and Arthur’s manual labor on the railroad that supports the logging endeavor cannot pay much more. One worker who cleared land for the railroad, Lemuel Ownby, a partial model for Arthur Ownby, recalled that his pay for each eleven-hour work day was a dollar and a half (Dumas, “Lem Ownby” 1:12).

As Davis shows, industrial railroad logging facilitated the harvesting of forests in areas previously untouched: “Narrow-gauge railroad beds . . . could now be laid along the contours of steep hillsides in places once thought inaccessible by lumbermen. From there, logs of all sizes were ‘skidded’ by cables across steep slopes to awaiting railroad cars for loading and transport. The end result was, in effect, a clear-cut since the skidded logs destroyed everything in their path” (168). In her 1955 book The French Broad, a popular history of the
French Broad River in Sevier County, Tennessee, and adjoining Buncombe County, North Carolina, Wilma Dykeman observes that clearing the land in the southern Appalachians had always been a wasteful “slaughter of the trees”: “From days of the first ax-wielding settlers through . . . the arrival of the band sawmill and the really big operators, the policy has been almost completely one of cut out and get out” (255–56). But industrial railroad logging took clear-cutting to a larger scale and into more remote wilderness areas.

The clear-cutting and skid trails led to erosion and wildfires, to which sparks from the locomotives and brushpiles of logging refuse contributed. The erosion of the topsoil in logged areas reduced the amount of rainwater that could soak into the mountain soil, depleting the water tables, drastically increasing runoff, and aggravating flooding (Davis 168–69). And of course the deforestation, worsened by the devastating chestnut blight, an imported disease that hit the Smoky Mountains by the 1920s, constituted extensive destruction of wildlife habitats. The blight was so rampant that by 1940 virtually all the American chestnuts in the entire Appalachian chain were dead or diseased (Davis 193–94)—a reality reflected in the “barren” chestnuts of The Orchard Keeper (172).

Thus after Ownby has struggled to the crest of Chilhowee Mountain in the spring of 1941, he rests against the trunk of a “broken chestnut the color of stone,” the sole tree in a field of sedge, not spared the blight even in its isolation from other trees (190). The loss of habitat resulting from logging industry practices and careless international trade lies behind the declining numbers of mink, muskrats, and panthers noticed by John Wesley and Ownby as well as their abiding perception of a diminished world.

Although it introduced an industrial economy to the mountains, the railroad work itself was conducted in rather primitive fashion. Dykeman writes that “it was work done by hand and sweat and, yes, even blood. There was no machinery. . . . There were only heavy picks swung in a rhythm of near desperation, shovels loading leaden masses of Appalachian mud, and horses and mules straining under the long haul of the wagons. Even the dynamite was homemade. All the drilling of rock was done by hand, and sometimes the old pioneer method of fire and water (fire built on rock to heat it, then doused with cold water to make it crack) was used” (French 161). The hard and primitive nature of his labor against the land may initially blind young Arthur Ownby to the fact that his attempt to support his family by working for the railroad implicates him in the progressive destruction of the wilderness. But Arthur soon comes to recognize and regret his participation in this assault that had far-reaching effects not only on the land and wildlife but also on the human culture of the region, culminating in the mountain folks’ loss of their “semi-agrarian and intimately forest-dependent way of life” (Davis 198). “By the end of the Great Depression,” Davis writes in his final summation of the effects of
industrial railroad logging, “farmers had, in many ways, become less rather
than more self-sufficient, causing many residents to leave their marginal farms
for logging or coal camps or migrate into neighboring towns and cities where
textile mills and tanneries had begun to dominate the local economy” (205).
Among the changes were a move toward monoculture among those who con-
tinued to farm and a reduction in family size (Davis 197). Further, as Dykeman
writes,

The rails were laid, leading almost like the tracks of some animate mon-
ster, both into and out of isolation.

Now the tallow candles on mountain tables could give way to oil lamps,
New England factory cloth—gingham and muslin and percale—could re-
place rough linsey-woolsey, and the expansive agents for sewing machines
and organs, lightning rods and enlarged pictures, would travel over the
watershed, penetrating creeks and coves with their own particular symp-
tom of “civilization.” (French 164)

K. Wesley Berry rightly points out that the mail-order or store purchases of
the novel’s characters reflect this new dependence on manufactured goods and
consumption of processed foods (52). Sylder buys his boots from a catalogue
and wears a pair of store-bought socks for a week, then burns and replaces
them, signaling his involvement in the new, throw-away culture. “Looms and
spinning wheels largely became things of the past,” Davis writes (197)—a phe-
nomenon that figures in The Orchard Keeper: In the attic of the Rattners’ old log
house was a loom, but since East Tennessee families no longer make their own
clothing, they have burned it as firewood (62).

The resulting changes in home-building techniques and materials are also
reflected in the novel. The ancient but still sound log house in which the Ratt-
ners settle persists as a reminder of the passing mountain way of life. Its logs
are “hand-squared and chinked with clay, the heavy rafters in the loft pinned
with wooden pegs.” The structure is reputed to be “the oldest house in the
county,” yet its rafters still exhibit “a yellow newness,” and only its roof shakes
fail to contribute to the dwelling’s overall appearance of being “impervious to
weather and time” (62–63). But this log house seems unique in Red Branch of
the 1930s and early ’40s. Due to the logging industry, “‘Boxed’ houses—that is,
frameless structures made exclusively with sawn planks and boards—gradually
replaced log cabins as residents working seasonally for lumber companies had
less time and help to build traditional log homes” (Davis 197). And with the
advent of the steam-powered sawmills early in the twentieth century, the
availability of sawn lumber accelerated the transition away from log structures
(Shields 58, photo caption). The boxed house has become the new norm in
Red Branch. Accommodating Increase Tipton’s clan are the “jerrybuilt shacks”
he constructs with Sylder’s help. In contrast to the Rattners’ log dwelling, these more modern houses are “endowed with an air transient and happenstantial as if set there by the recession of floodwaters. Even the speed with which they were constructed could not outdistance the decay for which they held such affinity” (11). Old as it is, the “box-shaped” Green Fly Inn also lacks the stability of the log house, which does not creak in the wind. Nailed to a tree, the saloon sways with each gust, impressing the drinkers with its “precariousness” (12–13). And Ownby’s loss of his earlier way of life is hinted in his already shabby boxed cabin in Red Branch, “a small board shack with the laths curling out like hair awry, bleached to a metal-gray” and missing a front step (56). When John Wesley revisits the log house in the novel’s final chapter, he finds that the wind has finally invaded this solid structure through its broken windows and its fallen roof shakes. This once-impervious shelter, emblem of the mountaineers’ vanished way of life, no longer shelters any human and seems in a limited way to be returning to nature. When John Wesley acknowledges that “it was never his house anyway,” he alludes not only to his family’s status as squatters but also to his recognition that he was born too late to have inherited the way of life once known by Ownby, the forest-dependent life of the mountaineers for which he feels such affinity (244).

In his classic 1913 description of the mountain culture of North Carolina and Tennessee, Our Southern Highlanders, Horace Kephart wrote that in the “snort” of the logging train he could hear the death knell of the mountain environment and the culture of the mountain people:

Slowly, but inexorably, a leviathan was crawling into the wilderness and was soon to consume it.

“All this,” I apostrophized, “shall be swept away, tree and plant, beast and fish. . . . The simple-hearted native men and women will scatter and disappear. In their stead will come slaves speaking strange tongues.

. . . Let me not see it! No; I will

“Get me to some far-off land
Where higher mountains under heaven stand . . .
Where other thunders roll amid the hills,
Some mightier wind a mightier forest fills
With other strains through other-shapen boughs.”

(104–5)

Kephart’s prophecy and lament echo eerily in The Orchard Keeper, both in Ownby’s desire to retreat to the mountains to escape the agents of modernity and in the lament of the “narrator,” John Wesley, for the vanquished mountain people in the closing frame.
It had begun in the 1880s, in a time of peace, but industrial railroad logging eventually became part of “war’s machinery,” “disinheriting” the mountain people, to quote *Cities of the Plain* (204), the third novel of McCarthy’s post-nuclear Border Trilogy. According to Davis, despite growing recognition of the ecological damage it caused, railroad logging increased during World War I, peaking just after 1920, and the postwar building boom kept the demand for timber high. Such war-driven demand motivated the industry to press into even the most remote areas of the mountains. These outposts of remaining wilderness, the “higher mountains” for which Kephart yearns, were, Davis writes, “in effect” the Great Smoky Mountains, where over two billion board feet of lumber were harvested from 1900 to 1938 (Davis 171), a year that mediates between the end of Section I and the beginning of Section II of *The Orchard Keeper*.

Logging in the Great Smoky Mountains is intimately connected with the creation of the national park there, and the history of the park further illuminates Ownby’s stance with regard to government and the modern world. The park movement began at a local level in 1923 with the efforts of Knoxville businessman Willis P. Davis and his wife, state congresswoman Ann Davis, who were prompted by their desire to preserve the natural beauty of the mountains and protect the remaining virgin timberlands from logging (Campbell 6, 13–14). But Carlos C. Campbell pointed out that at that time few in Knoxville were aware of the appeal of the wilderness area near their city (13), and it seems clear from all accounts that much of the support for the park movement in Knoxville was engendered through economic arguments. Soon many influential businesspeople in the urban center added their voices, so much so that in his interpretation of Knoxville history, William J. MacArthur Jr., asserted in a rather celebratory tone, “In many ways the park seems to have been the creation of Knoxville’s commercial-civic elite” (55). He pointed out that the movement had substantial support in the newspapers and among civic leaders. In his early, extended history of the park movement, Campbell, himself manager of the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce during the early years of the park movement, chronicled in a self-effacing way the involvement of that body in the creation of the park. Under his management, among other initiatives, the Chamber of Commerce raised funds to bring state legislators and officials to see at first hand the attractions of the park region (32). Campbell’s account reveals the complicated mixture of motives that drove the park movement in Knoxville: the promise of economic development in the urban area that would accrue from the creation of the park, the desire to preserve the natural environment that had already been endangered by the logging industry, and also to a lesser degree, the hope to preserve East Tennessee’s “pioneer history” (16).
Except for those individuals who had financial interests in logging and preferred to see the area designated a national forest, which would have favored continued commercial harvesting of timber, the Knoxville “elite was united in support of the project which became the basis of East Tennessee’s tourist industry and ultimately paid the city’s businesses great dividends” (MacArthur 56). In the park-versus-forest debate, Colonel David C. Chapman, who emerged as the local park movement’s chief spokesman, argued that neither “advertising,” nor “prestige,” nor the requisite profit would come from yet a third national forest in East Tennessee (Dunn 242). The development of a national park, on the other hand, would bring tourism dollars to Knoxville and the area. As Campbell put it in the 1960s,

Park advocates . . . predicted that the national park would soon provide a still greater dollars-and-cents value [than would a national forest]. After decades of hindsight, it is easy to see that, although the aesthetic facet of the Great Smokies remains the most important consideration, the national park also has a far greater economic value than a national forest could have provided.

A national forest is a high-character commercial enterprise. A national park is essentially a cultural agency, with incidental but important economic benefits. (56)

Members of the Knoxville elite, organized as the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association, approached the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee, urging it to consider the Tennessee side of the Great Smoky Mountains for its proposed park in addition to the several locations in North Carolina it had already planned to study! (Broome 356; Campbell 16, 22–23). These citizens also proposed legislation and raised money for the purchase of the required lands. Durwood Dunn’s study of the Cades Cove community, which was taken over by the park, looks at the history from the very different perspective of the mountaineers who were dispossessed by its creation. Yet he agrees that the impetus behind the park’s formation came largely from influential Knoxville businessmen who, while they may have had a genuine conservationist interest in the project, also anticipated that it would promote the economic development of East Tennessee through tourism, which would lead to commercial profits for Knoxville. Dunn writes that the potential for substantial profit was a key selling point in the promotional literature soliciting private donations for the purchase of land for the park.

As Roderick Nash observes in Wilderness and the American Mind, “The laws creating National Parks and Monuments deliberately left the way open for the construction of roads and tourist accommodations” (222). The missions of a park, as established by the National Park Service Act of 1916, were not only to