Western North Carolina is known as a destination spot, a place of deep natural beauty combined with cheerful bohemianism, fierce independence of spirit, and profoundly inventive craftsmanship. Too often, though, the western third of the state is seen as a temporary stop, a place to recharge briefly and inhale cleaner air, visit grand vistas, or patronize the varied artisans who cluster in the area, before returning to busy lives elsewhere. But, as this volume shows, the west can catch and hold people too, and both inspire and nurture their own native creativity, charity, and understanding.

The twelve “notables” in this volume represent a small but impressive sampling of some of the extraordinary individuals who have made western North Carolina their home. The book is a unique blend of oral history, photographic scrapbook, chronology, and testimonials. The chapters vary slightly from one individual to another, but each one generally includes highlights from the life of the person being profiled, photos of significant people or events, and appreciations from neighbors, friends, and even some celebrities. The bulk of each chapter, however, is given over to a transcription of a guided interview conducted by Jack Prather, which seeks to tease out events both great and small that have affected the life and the career of each interviewee. The format itself would seem too pedestrian to produce anything but the most prosaic results, but the author has chosen his subjects well, and his sympathetic technique—as well as the obvious friendship and interest he feels for his subjects—elicits details both harrowing and heroic.

Prather’s eclecticism makes for rewarding reading, and covers a wide range of professions, disciplines, and life stories. The arts are, not surprisingly, richly represented, with profiles of David Holt (music), Glenis Redmond (poetry), Billie Ruth Sudduth (basket making), Juleyan Davis (painting), and Richard Ritter (studio glass). Philanthropic and charitable endeavors, combined with or arising out of professional careers, are also represented, in the lives of Dr. Olson Huff (children’s medicine), Captain Ray West (Moldovan Children’s Fund), and the Reverend Dr. Dan Matthews (rector Emeritus, Trinity church). The remaining four profiles represent business (Joe Epley), law (Judge Harry Martin), education (Doug Orr), and emergency medicine (Dr. Matthew Hayes).

The work also includes a brief introduction to the geography and unique character of western North Carolina. It is self-published, and as such, the book could perhaps have used tighter editorial control, as misspellings appear periodically. Also, the book betrays the author’s obvious admiration for his subjects through ubiquitous and sometimes overwhelming lists of honors, press cuttings, and encomia that he includes. Nevertheless, the compelling narrative of these twelve lives, combined with fascinating glimpses into our collective history, makes this book a worthy addition to any collection of North Caroliniana. Suitable for grades seven and up.
Steven Case
State Library of North Carolina