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Shenandoah

Shenandoah

A Story of Conservation and Betrayal

SUE EISENFELD

*University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London*

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For Neil

The journey is an evocation of three things . . . : a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit, which endures.

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

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Author's Note

FOR THOSE OF YOU who are tempted to find all the places I've described in this book, I give this guidance: For your safety, please know that only experienced, well-conditioned hikers, familiar with Shenandoah National Park, the use of map and compass, leave-no-trace philosophy, risk prevention, and wilderness first aid and outfitted with the proper maps, gear, and equipment should even consider off-trail hiking. The National Park Service and Shenandoah's rangers advise hikers to follow only the formal system of blazed trails (near which plenty of history can be found—many of the trails are former roads and are located in areas once inhabited), so that you do not become lost, stranded, or injured or require an expensive and time-consuming rescue. The park also advises hikers to stay on the marked trails to protect park resources, such as rare plants, and to prevent erosion.

Please always behave with respect when examining the signs of human habitation, here and in any other protected area. Not only is the removal or disturbance of natural objects or historic artifacts illegal in any national park, but it is disrespectful as well. Darwin Lambert, the first employee hired in Shenandoah National Park, in 1936, once wrote, "Cemetery seeking in this recycling park has been described as an exercise of high skill and empathy, a way of touching eternal realities of nature and humanity."

Prologue

ONE DAY, WHILE HIKING off trail in an area of Shenandoah National Park called Butterwood Branch—near where a tavern, a gristmill, a cider press, a schoolhouse, and an overnight stagecoach stop once stood—I lay down in the leaves on the edge of a rut in the earth that was once a wagon road, looked up at the silhouette of trees framing a damp gray sky, and decided to leave my office job of fifteen years and write this book.

My husband, Neil, our friend Jeremy, and I had spent the day bushwhacking, as we always do, sleuthing for backcountry cemeteries. We had succeeded in finding all three on our scavenger hunt agenda: the unmarked fieldstones buried inside a nest of greenbrier and graveyard myrtle near the junction of a decommissioned trail; the single carved headstone located miles into the skeletal winter woods where we sat for a moment's rest and were serenaded by a pack of howling coyotes; and the weatherworn marble obelisk at the end of a backwoods road trace barely discernible even by three sets of well-trained eyes.

Butterwood Branch, that magical place, is where we would go on to discover the largest dry-stack stone wall we'd ever encountered in the park, chest high and six feet wide at the base, moss and lichen covered, like liver spots on an aged hand—a fieldstone barricade that once kept in livestock, we presume, handwrought by some unknown master craftsman. Beneath the forest canopy,

we uncovered an old spring, a rusty jalopy, and crumbling stone chimneys, plus a thawing deer carcass and tiny mouse bones on a rock. While hiking single file on a wide, grassy, old road—so surprisingly not filled in by trees or brush during its more than seventy-five years of disuse that it felt like the Yellow Brick Road—we scared up a rare golden eagle from its fresh, bloody great blue heron feast.

As I nestled into the soft ground, sounds of animal footsteps around me, cradled in the faded-blue folds of the gentle Appalachian ridges that have become my second home, I decided I wanted to write the stories of what I have seen, heard, touched, and discovered as a hiker in a de-peopled and re-wilded park—a place that was once unfound and then inhabited and is now “back to nature” once again.

I wanted to know what happened here, to feel viscerally the stories that would explain the headstones and shoe leather and washbasins and China shards that we have found throughout these wild woods. I wanted to know the place where the cabbages were bigger and the apples were sweeter, where the water tasted better and the air was cleaner, where you never had to lock your door and happiness was sitting out on a porch in the evening and listening to crickets. And even though sometimes you could see your footprints in the snow inside your own log-cabin house on the second floor, where the weather came in through the roof, the people who once lived here have said, “They were some of the best days of our lives.”

Here, in this national park—in the mountains, in the country, away from it all—there is a tension. Most visitors don’t feel it because they are blissfully unaware. They might notice an errant headstone, an old medicine bottle, even the exoskeleton of a broken woodstove by the

side of the trail. But it can all easily be shrugged away. I did that too, for a number of years. I was fascinated but didn't ask questions. I learned a few facts along the way and drew fast conclusions. It's so much easier that way, not to know too much.

When I began asking questions of the park personnel, my words came out hostile. I made assumptions about people and motivations and the times. The story, as it seemed to me, was that a bunch of urban, privileged men in suits simply swooped in and muscled a few thousand self-sufficient farmers, orchardists, lumbermen, millers, and mountain tradesmen off their land against their will to create a national park, so that over-worked Washington DC residents could enjoy a weekend playground, unfettered by the snaggletoothed riffraff.

In fact, the government did use its right of eminent domain to take land for the public good—in this case, for conservation and protection, for a national park, for the benefit of a nation—and paid the landowners, in exchange, money that some of the evicted residents thought so dirty and insulting that they refused to take it. Many of the landowners and residents—descendants of some of America's first pioneers—used the tools available to them in that era and culture and circumstance to try to fight back: leaving it to God's will, writing letters to decision makers, speaking to government staff, and in some cases, appealing to the courts. They didn't necessarily want more money; most just wanted to keep living the kind of simple life they knew on the piece of earth they loved.

They lost.

So did the landowners and residents who once lived in what is now Great Smoky Mountains National Park and a variety of other stunning federal lands throughout the nation, either through eminent domain or other

land deals. They've been white, black, and Native people, all, in a spate of national conservation and commemoration on private lands from the 1930s to the present.

I knew none of this when I began hiking in Shenandoah. I hiked blindly for nearly two decades—group excursions with colleagues and friends, from the time I graduated from college until I became middle-aged; hikes motivated by views, peaks, and personal goals. It was a wild national park, after all. Green space, undeveloped, untrammelled, conserved; a concentrate of clean air, clean water, and quiet; species, habitat, and ecosystems: streams, wetlands, forests, high mountain ponds.

Once you begin to know something, though, you cannot unknow it, and over time, when I learned more of the story, I became more and more drawn to the people of the park—the ones who left and the ones who put their leaving into motion, the ones I sympathized with and the ones who drew my ire—with a particular curiosity for one man: William E. Carson, an unglamorous, long-forgotten cog in a wheel of Virginia history who seems the truest and staunchest driving force behind the project. A man who “has done more for the State than anyone who has not been Governor” with “a depth of vision and a strength of purpose that never have been adequately recognized.” Based on the broad brushstroke of the story, it seemed he was responsible for all the unpleasantness of removing people from the park. He got under my skin. I wanted to know more about his motivations, his worldview, and what kind of man he really was.

And so I decided I wanted to visit the places of these stories purposefully, to search for the untold, the answers that would quell my growing discomfort of enjoying this misbegotten but beloved park. I wanted to backpack and bushwhack the backwoods, to the heart and

soul of where the stories lived, to explore the hills and the hollows of the lost communities of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, to know the people who once lived here and the men who determined their fate, and to discern for myself the justice of what happened here.

Shenandoah

All Souls' Day

“GONE,” WAYNE BALDWIN SAYS of the large clapboard-sided, tin-roofed house that once stood in a hollow nestled among five mountains in what is now Shenandoah National Park. He has led my husband, Neil, and me down Hull School Trail and into thick brambles. We stand with a pile of large granite rocks at our feet, and an occasional brick, in a long rectangular gulley surrounded by a forest of towering trees.

“They knocked it down and burnt it up,” Wayne goes on, smoking a cigarette, wearing a fleece vest with the national park logo. “This is where my cousins Beulah and Mary grew up.”

The sky is achingly blue as we look up beyond the tallest tulip poplars, and the sun is filtering down to our feet through head-high bushes, casting camouflage shadows on our skin. Next to the house site is a bone-dry creek bed full of rounded rocks made red by soil, shards of pottery and a large glass jug, metal hardware that has grown thick with rust, and a piece of a horse-shoe. Below the house site is a spring covered with a still-standing concrete archway, spilling out into a small run where Neil picks up a red eft salamander from under a rock and where, at a time when most mountain homes had no running water, Beulah Bolen, ninety years old, once did laundry in a stream-fed, gas-powered Maytag washing machine, heating water for it over a fire. “It took me just as long to get the crank going as it did to

do the wash,” she told us earlier in the day, about her early-twentieth-century youth.

Her sister Mary Bolen Burner—a feisty woman with tight white hair, elegant dark glasses, and a high-pitched booming voice—wanted to come down this steep trail with us, to show us the old home place herself, but the last time she did it, she said, “the way up reminded me that I’m eighty-eight.”

What was once a massive eight-room frame house built in 1895, with two stone-and-brick chimneys, wallpaper, a telephone, and carved fireplace mantelpieces in five rooms, surrounded by apple and peach orchards and eight outbuildings, including a barn, a distillery later used to store wagons and buggies, a hog pen, a corn house, a meat house for drying and salting hogs, and a wagon shed where the family sheared sheep, has now been completely integrated into the forest. There is hardly any sign of this previous life left, and there’s hardly anything any of us can say, standing around the haphazard rock pile. We do a collective head shake and then plow back through the brush to join the festivities up the hill.

☞ It’s September, the weekend of our anniversary, and as we do each fall, we’re celebrating in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, where we spent our first weekend together as young lovers after moving to the same state, where we cemented many of our early friendships, where we’ve gone repeatedly for recreation more than anywhere else, and where we were married many years ago. We are spending the day with Wayne Baldwin, a man we have never met. We are here to attend his family reunion.

It is an unusual family reunion, held here twice a year. His relatives come from as far away as California,

Oregon, and Washington, not to drive to a hall or a restaurant, not to cozy down with kin in a living room or backyard. They come to connect with the living and the dead, here at the Bolen Cemetery—once in the center of a private cornfield, now in the middle of the federal government’s Shenandoah National Park.

The park’s former backcountry, wilderness, and trails manager calls Wayne “quite a backcountry cemetery sleuth.” Wayne is, in fact, the family historian. A tall, trim man in his fifties with a lean face, wire-framed glasses, and a head of thick but receding salt-and-pepper hair, he’s been coming to the Bolen Cemetery since he was twelve. Back in the 1960s, a high school class project had him researching his great-great-great-grandfather, who drove an ammunition wagon in the Civil War, and his great-great-great-great-grandfather, who fought in the War of 1812.

Wayne Baldwin is no ordinary man. He is one of only a handful of park descendants who faithfully return to their ancestors’ backcountry cemeteries, abandoned against their will in the 1920s and 1930s when the Commonwealth of Virginia condemned the land of a few thousand residents and paid what was considered just compensation so it could donate a chunk of the Blue Ridge to the federal government for a national park. Some of the despondent evacuees assumed that the cemeteries were off-limits, and so they never returned.

The National Park Service, the ultimate recipient of the taken land, has gone from conciliatory, to hard-lined, to somewhere in the middle, regarding cemeteries in national parks. In the 1930s, to help ease the pain of losing family cemeteries (at Shenandoah as well as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and other places), the second National Park Service director, Horace M. Albright, issued a statement committing that “we will

assume it is an obligation of the National Park Service to assist in keeping these cemeteries as cleaned up as possible after we have taken them over as part of the Park.”

Albright also promised that those with family members buried there would always be allowed to come and go as they pleased, to clear brush and briars.

But no one explained these policies to the families, so few came. Today, for many of these sacred sites, there's not a road, not a path, that'll lead you to them. And if there were, you wouldn't find them pristine. Many are nearly obliterated, with obelisks toppled, iron gates mangled. Nothing takes down a burial ground faster than nature's demolition services: Virginia's verdant briars and creeping vines, its fires, bears, gypsy moths, and falling trees.

Albright's commitment to upkeep was honored until the mid-1950s, when the sixth National Park Service director, Conrad L. Wirth, determined that the park service was unable “to assume the full responsibility for the care of the cemeteries,” which number more than a hundred in Shenandoah.

In 1964 Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which eventually restricted human activities in 40 percent of the park. According to the act, federal wilderness areas are “lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition” and areas “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.” Wilderness areas throughout the nation can have no permanent roads, and roads that are already there are not maintained or are removed. Cars, chainsaws, and other mechanized equipment or machinery are prohibited. Not only do these rules make trail maintenance and other management more challenging for the agencies in charge, but any cemeteries in wilderness areas must be maintained by hand-tool-carrying, walk-in workers only.

In 1990 the cemetery directive changed again, withdrawing the park's gesture to furnish staff, equipment, or supplies for maintaining cemeteries and clarifying that the government would not now, not ever, build new roads to cemeteries that never had roads, like the many Neil and I have found by accident, off side trails, unmarked, overgrown with ivy and briars, in the middle of what visitors would now call "nowhere."

In the late 1990s the park determined that it was willing to work with recognized family organizations to establish cooperative agreements to assist in specific cemetery preservation projects, but ultimately, if families had not maintained their family plots in the past, "natural vegetative succession will reclaim the sites. No Park Service action will be taken to slow or abate this process."

Wayne and his predecessors have been avidly maintaining this particular cemetery for more than half a century. As far back as 1954, the park's chief ranger noted that of all the known cemeteries within the north district, the Bolen Cemetery "receives the most attention."

Wayne, in fact, has spent the last forty years of his life researching his family, tromping through the woods of Shenandoah National Park, where both sides of his family once lived and where both sides died. He trims brush and keeps the briars out of four family cemeteries within the park, three of which he travels to on foot, navigating what's left of the old wagon roads, concave ruts in the earth now filled with trees.

Wayne's family tree is complicated because a great-grandfather on his mother's side is the brother of a great-grandmother on his father's side, causing him to have relatives like a "double great-grandmother." He describes his relationship with Beulah and Mary as "my first cousins three times removed, times two; my second cous-

ins two times removed; and my second cousins three times removed,” all at the same time. Beulah and Mary’s father and Wayne’s double great-great-grandmother were brother and sister, and Beulah’s grandfather and Wayne’s great-great-great-grandmother (and, at the same time, great-great-grandmother—the same person on each side of the family) were brother and sister as well. Trying to draw this tree is nearly impossible.

Wayne’s grandfather Oscar Baldwin was one of the landowners who took the state government’s eminent-domain payoff money in the 1930s—\$715, or about \$9,440 in 2013, for his fifty-seven acres of steep, rocky land—and bought what he considered a better farm on better land, what some said was the opportunity of a lifetime. “\$500 at that time . . . was, well, it was like opening King Tut’s tomb,” one former resident said. Wayne says his grandfather was not kicked off the land, like so many people said they were; he left voluntarily to make a better life elsewhere.

Records indicate, though, that Mr. Baldwin had asked about remaining on the land longer than his permit had allowed. “Special Use Permits,” issued initially in 1934 to a few hundred residents who hadn’t yet left their properties, gave former landowners and other residents permission to stay on their former land until the government could build resettlement homesteads for them, until they could secure new housing, or until they went on the welfare rolls.

The permit prohibited occupants from engaging in most of the self-sufficiency activities they had been involved in all their lives, however, like small-scale grazing and farming as well as trapping, tanning, and timbering—stripping bark for tannins to preserve leather and using wood for wagons, tool handles, mill wheels, shingles, brooms, and barrel staves—creating a some-

what untenable state. It was government land, after all, and you can't have the public doing anything they want on government land. The commonwealth issued a permit to Oscar Baldwin in 1934, and records indicate he remained on the land until at least November 1937, one year after the park officially opened to the public, which was far past the time that park planners had wanted the area rid of inhabitants. A letter from park superintendent James Ralph (J. R.) Lassiter reveals that after Mr. Baldwin asked about staying longer, he—like many others who sought more time on the land they loved—was ordered to vacate by January 1938.

Perhaps the difference in perception about whether Oscar Baldwin was kicked off the land or voluntarily left is simply a matter of Wayne's positive and conciliatory outlook. Wayne explains that he has always sought to hear all sides of the park eviction story. Even though his maternal grandmother was "real bitter" about the government taking her family's land—explaining, "I can't quote my grandma's exact words, but there was always expletives, and most of the time the government was called 'them s-o-bs'"—he says his father and others in the family felt no ill will. He continues, "One cousin said that even though people raised Cain and heck about the park coming, if it hadn't been for the park, most people would've ended up uneducated, inbreeding, and never left." On the other hand, Wayne says, "uprooting all those people that had grown up with each other, intermarried, and displacing them, separating them—I'm sure it was a fearful thing indeed."

Neil and I show up at the Little Devils Stairs parking area at 11:00 a.m., not exactly sure what to expect. We know it will be a potluck lunch buffet, so we have brought a thirty-five-dollar peach pie from the best pie shop we know of in northern Virginia. Can't go wrong

with pie, we figure; it's not some new-fangled vegetarian dish, like Thai garlic green beans or blackened jerk tofu, which I might otherwise make for a potluck of my peers. I have never seen a pie that looked like this; rather than a crisscrossed lattice crust on top, the pastry crust is cut into serrated rounds that overlap each other all the way around the pie, except for a small circular opening in the middle to see through to the glowing orange peaches.

I feel self-conscious about not being related to anyone here, about not being related to anyone from the park, about being from the city—and a Yank. After the initial awkward greeting period, Wayne invites us into his SUV with his mom and cousin and takes off for the mile drive up the gravel fire road. We are a posse of about eight vehicles on a Do Not Enter park road. Rangers have unlocked the gate, due to Wayne's advance notice of the event and good relations with the park, but it feels illicit. Unlike most of our visits to this park, we're not here today to hike. We are not here to explore nature or to look for objects. We are here to honor everything that was lost to pave the way for our weekend-playground gain.

☞ Neil and I first saw this cemetery back in 1992, within a year of moving to Virginia. I remember walking on a flat stretch of trail under a dark canopy of trees that were leafed-out in a deep forest green, after a strenuous hike up Little Devils Stairs, when suddenly, light-colored tombstones surrounded by a stone wall came into view. It was like a dream, in which unlike objects or settings or people that don't belong together appear in the same scene as if totally normal.

I had never seen a cemetery in a backcountry forest or national park.

I remember stopping to look at this unlikely relic, remember thinking the discovery was exciting, like finding an arrowhead or a Confederate button in the soil. We hopped the stone wall and walked among granite, marble, and fieldstones. With no other Shenandoah cemeteries to compare with back then, we didn't wonder why briars had not taken over the plot, why trees had not grown up inside. We didn't wonder who came miles into the woods on federal land and mowed the lawn.

Today, we get the answers to what we never thought to ask.

When we arrive at the cemetery with Wayne, everyone bursts out of their vehicles and begins assembling tables and lawn chairs and food. When I see other deserts showing up at one end of the spread, I set the peach pie out among them. Those who aren't working on fixing lunch are fanning out to place pots of fresh flowers at the grave sites of their relatives.

Wayne's mom places a bouquet at the graves of her grandmother and her "baby aunt and uncle," ages six months and one month. Mary and Beulah visit their grandparents, who purchased the family's thousand acres and built the Bolen house they grew up in here. They pay tribute to their mother, who died at age forty-eight, as well as to their baby sister, age three. Their father, who planted the twenty or so Norway maples that now shade the cemetery, is buried somewhere else.

Beulah—a gentle, quiet woman, delicate with soft features and pillowy skin—laments that her mother died when Beulah was just twelve, leaving her in charge of a family with seven children. Her childhood was full of work—planting and cutting down corn, gathering eggs, shearing sheep, milking cows, plucking geese for feather beds, making soap, cutting wood, and drying apples by spreading them on roofs in the sun.

She recalls the carbide gas lamps that lit her childhood home, an unusual fixture for a mountain house of that time, as many used beeswax candles and kerosene lamps mounted on walls. Her father would buy large hunks of calcium carbide from the store, which were placed in a five-foot hole near the house. The hole contained a tank that kept a gas—produced from the reaction of carbide and water—sealed and under pressure. She remembers pipes emerging from the hole, carrying the gas to fixtures in every room.

People start to introduce us to others, and eventually we are integrated a bit more into the group. Neil makes conversation with the only other person not related to anyone, a friend of the family. Neil explains to him that we are learning about the people of the park, the ones who had been displaced. “Displaced,” the man spits. “That sounds like a Democrat word.” Then he tells Neil that he believes the real reason why the people were kicked out was because the Blue Ridge Mountains were intended to be used by the government during World War II if the Germans were to attack the nation’s capital, as a defensible position after Americans escaped to the west.

Outside the wrought-iron gate, when the tablecloths, utensils, and coolers are ready and the food is unwrapped, we are all called over to eat. One of the family patriarchs asks everyone to take hands and count off how many have joined here today (twenty-four) and to say grace. Then everyone digs in: mac and cheese, pasta salad, cucumber salad, baked beans with sausage, green beans, coleslaw, fried chicken, potato chips, and pimento cheese sandwiches (grated orange cheese with mayonnaise, chopped pimentos, and spices on white bread—a southern tradition). I had been worried I might not be able to find much to eat because I am a vegetarian, but my plate is full of delectable country cooking.

It's not too long before people start eating dessert. In no time at all, big hunks are cut out of the coconut cream pie, a hole is dug into banana pudding, brownies disappear, blood-red Jell-O is jiggling on flimsy white plates, and chocolate cake begins to vanish.

But nobody touches my pie.

☞ Though I am antidevelopment and a conservationist, an avid lover of the national parks, and grateful for the drive and passion of the visionaries and planners who made this park happen despite all odds, the history of the land condemnation here has always seemed devastating to me.

Some people who left unwillingly refused ever to partake of the park. Some descendants say they feel horrible when they are there. Others, though, enjoyed the payment from the government—after the physical and emotional devastation of the Civil War; the decline of once-strong mountain-trade industries like tanning and handmade textiles, which succumbed to mechanized industrialization in lowland factories; the hard times of the Depression; the worst drought the state had ever seen; and the loss of the American chestnut trees, the economic workhorse of the mountains—and they relished the ability to start over somewhere else.

Beulah is the first living former resident I've ever met. In all our history-hikes up mountains and down hollows, bushwhacking through the past to try to understand what happened on these lands, examining the last vestiges of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English, German, Scots-Irish, Irish, French, and Swiss settlers who once made their homes here, Neil and I have never really heard from a living, breathing survivor. When I ask how she felt upon hearing the family

would have to move away from their home, from the rolling fields and wide sky that can hardly be pictured now under the shadow of the forest canopy, whether her family was content with leaving, she shrieks, “No, indeedy! We cried like babies!”

“It really wasn’t better,” she explains calmly. “We were moved over there, and we didn’t have no fruit, and the water was hard. Over here, we had a great big spring, and we could collect it in a bucket to drink. We once had all kinds of orchards and nuts.” She was fifteen, and Mary thirteen, when they relocated to the town of Sperryville, about six miles away in the lowlands. But when asked if the memories of what happened to her have made the park too painful to enjoy during the long years of her life, she says with her slow southern drawl, stoically, befitting of someone with the wisdom of time and age, “Well, you get over that.”

I eventually notice that each dessert maker has cut slices in advance to get people started, and so finally—in my tormented, self-conscious state—I walk over to my beautiful, untouched pie, grab a knife from another dessert, and make some slices ready to eat. Cousins hovering near the food table begin congregating around me as I work.

No one’s engaging with me. I am sure they don’t remember my name. But soon a woman named Robin inches toward me from behind and leans in close. “Everyone is talking about that pie,” she whispers in my ear. “No one makes that kind of pie anymore.”

Still slicing, I feel a smile creep over my face in quiet relief. “My grandmother used to make a pie like that,” she says, referring to the overlapping pastry-rounds design. “But no one since.”

I set down the knife and step away from the table, only to have the space I inhabited filled instantly with

eager pie eaters. I had hit the jackpot. Robin and several other people take huge wedges of it.

At cleanup time, there is still about a third of the pie left. I would love to have more of it, but I approach Robin, who has warmed my day with thoughts of her grandmother's lost tradition. "Do you want the rest of this?" I ask. Her eyes widen. "I'd love it," she said.

At the end of the picnic, we are all hugs. Mary and Beulah and Robin bid us a fond farewell, and Wayne and his mom gush about how nice it was for us to come. I don't have words to convey how grateful I am that they took us in to the folds of their family—the joyous day as well as the painful past. For the nearly two decades we have been tromping around the hills and the hollows of this magnificent place, feeling like interlopers, we have never gotten this close to the real mountain residents, the flesh and blood of history.

They have put faces to the stone foundations and rock walls we will continue to find. They have put names to the unmarked graves to which our future hikes in this park will no doubt lead. Despite my own inner maelstrom, they have let us know, with their acceptance: *It is alright that you are here.*