

New Harlan Hubbard Biography to be Published

By Susan Griffin Ward

It is our great honor to share an excerpt from the prologue of *Driftwood: The Life of Harlan Hubbard*, by author Jessica K. Whitehead. This exceptional biography will be released on February 25, 2025, and is available for pre-order at kentuckypress.com.

Harlan Hubbard was an artist, writer, skilled craftsman, and sustainability pioneer who left a record of the remarkable life he created, with his wife Anna, in the form of books (*Shantyboat* and *Payne Hollow: Life on the Fringe of Society*), paintings, and their cabin and studio at Payne Hollow on the edge of the Ohio River in Trimble County, Kentucky. When most of his contemporaries saw the Ohio River as a resource for cheap commerce and manufacturing, or worse, a convenient way to get rid of sewage and chemicals, Hubbard treasured the Ohio River as a life-source and saw it with the eyes of an artist and the heart of an adventurer.

In *Driftwood: The Life of Harlan Hubbard*, Whitehead tells a fascinating story of a man whose life and work have deeply resonated with generations of people drawn to art, adventure, and simpler lifestyles. The biography highlights Hubbard's place in American cultural history, positioning him alongside other iconic thinkers and artists. Through vivid storytelling, she captures the essence of Hubbard's life, the impact of his work, and his enduring contributions to sustainable living in today's ecological landscape.

Jessica K. Whitehead is a writer and curator of collections at the Kentucky Derby Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, coauthor of *The History of the Kentucky Derby in 75 Objects* and a contributor to *The Watercolors of Harlan Hubbard: From the Collection of Bill and Flo Caddell*. She was a founding board member of the non-profit Payne Hollow on the Ohio.

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Jessica K. Whitehead at Payne Hollow. Credit Susan Griffin Ward



This view of the Ohio River from Payne Hollow looking towards Plowhandle Point served as an inspiration for many of Harlan's paintings. Credit: Susan Griffin Ward

An Excerpt from *Driftwood: The Life of Harlan Hubbard*

By Jessica K. Whitehead



Image credit: Jessica K. Whitehead, Behringer-Crawford Museum, and Caddell Collection.

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"I still feel sure," Harlan wrote in his journal not long after the 1937 floodwaters receded, "that if I follow the plain, natural course, like water running down a slope, which does not try to climb over the hill, but finally gets to the lowest point, by whatever winding, that I too will reach the proper point at just the right time, in the most

fitting conditions and circumstances." There, outdoors, in his personal wilderness—following the example of so many other American artists, writers, and thinkers before him—Harlan worked and waited, allowing the river of time to shape him, to carry him, to deposit him where he belonged.

This book is a study of that journey and a celebration of how Harlan Hubbard, a man who was so uncertain and unfulfilled for the first half of his life, lived out the second half in an ecstatic—if largely unwitnessed—blaze of vision and fulfillment. Ultimately, the forces of time and circumstance shaped him and strengthened him, transforming him into something strangely beautiful and resolutely unique. Harlan's life was an example of formation under the pressures of external forces, his sense of purpose and worth molded and strengthened like a fallen tree limb into drift. As the poet Richard Wilbur observes in his 1948 meditation on driftwood, the living matter was

**Floated in their singleness,
And in that deep subsumption they were Never dissolved;
But shaped and flowingly fretted by the waves' ever surpassing stress,
With the gnarled swerve and tangle of tides Finely involved.**

Wilbur concludes,

**In a time of continued dry abdications and of damp complicities,
They are fit to be taken for signs, these emblems Royally sane,**

**Which have ridden to homeless wreck, and long resolved in the lathe of all the seas,
But have saved in spite of it all their dense ingenerate grain.**

So Harlan, in the lathe of his responsibilities, emerged on an unfamiliar shore of understanding his own, "ingenerate grain."

That grain, for those who are willing to trace it, is complex—delicately ribbed with the evidence of Harlan's multidisciplinary career. Within his "second act," Harlan produced hundreds more paintings, prints, and sketches, all of them displaying a sensitivity both to the currents of American art history and to his unique artistic voice. He kept poetic and honest journals, which help illuminate his development into the writer of three published books—unheralded classics that teeter between nature writing and memoir. And perhaps most remarkably, he did all of this in concert with a woman—his wife, Anna Wonder Eikenhout Hubbard—who, unlike his mother, encouraged and nurtured Harlan's desires to live out a radical, countercultural experiment. Together, Harlan and Anna Hubbard built a life, as he would write, "on the fringe of society," perfecting the art of living and carving into every experience the values of simplicity, function, and beauty.

As a reflection of that life, the greatest creative genius of Harlan Hubbard emerged. His art and writing stands as a largely unexplored record of what the poet William Carlos Williams called the "American grain": an ethos of boundless innovation and optimism, fueled by a craving for (and respect of) the American natural landscape. This grain can be observed throughout the nation's cultural history: in artists like Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Burchfield; in writers like Twain, Cather, Whitman, Wilbur, and Berry; in philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau; in the lives of the earliest Indigenous residents of the continent; in the curiosity and wonder of many subsequent transplants, explorers, and settlers; in the followers of the modern sustainability movement.

But more than any of the individual cultural luminaries listed here, Harlan committed so profoundly to this philosophical ethos—sometimes to a fault—that, alongside the deep joy and satisfaction of a life well-lived, there existed significant professional sacrifice. Harlan's worldview, cultivated in opposition to the greed, exceptionalism, and exploitation he saw in most examples of modern American culture, required the deliberate, often lonely, and always laborious work of challenging modes of convention. It necessitated a certain recognition from Harlan that he would never be—at least during his lifetime—as commercially viable as the quality of his work deserved. Although Harlan exhibited in more than thirty shows during his lifetime and managed to attract the attention of a mainstream New York publishing house with his first literary manuscript, he was never traditionally successful within the confines of a capitalistic society. In some ways, Harlan made peace with this fact, proud to have stayed true to his values against the temptations of financial success or critical acclaim. But it is difficult to learn the details of his biography, see his paintings, read his books and journals, visit the structures he built, and understand the revolutionary life he and Anna led without desiring clarification of the historical record for Harlan, posthumously. Harlan's first biographer, the acclaimed Kentucky thinker, writer, and farmer, Wendell Berry, knew Harlan and Anna personally, but even Berry was astonished, upon casting a more critical eye over their shared life, and over Harlan's work, by the breadth of the Hubbard legacy. Berry writes:

As I reread his published books in sequence, and then went on to the man's hundreds of unpublished pages, and looked at the hundreds of watercolors and other works of art that almost nobody had ever seen, I felt Harlan emerging, in my own consciousness of him, into a public stature far larger than I could have expected him to have on the basis of what I knew when he was alive. It became possible for me to imagine a life for Harlan in other, later minds that would know him only from his writing and his pictures. It became possible to imagine that Harlan, who lived so conscientiously apart from what most people consider the history of the modern world, will at last enter that history as a significant part of it and have an influence on it.

This time has come for Harlan, made only more urgent by the intense relevancy Harlan's life and work can have in our contemporary age of climate crisis and cultural degradation.