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Living Waters

Ben Casey

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In Living Waters, the second volume of his series documenting the major rivers of North Carolina, photographer and essayist Ben Casey explores the Trent River. Starting his trek where the stream begins modestly at Nobles Mill Pond in Lenoir County, Casey paddles—and portages—along the river's convoluted course through Jones County to its mouth, where the Trent empties into the Neuse River at New Bern.

During its nineteenth-century heyday, before waterways and waterpower were supplanted by asphalt and gasoline, the Trent was a powerhouse for numerous gristmills and a busy commercial highway used by plantations and loggers alike. But, unlike many of the rivers that flow through North Carolina's coastal plain, the Trent today shows only scant evidence of humanity's presence. Casey's photographs reveal a river that, along most of its sinuous length, is rapidly returning to its primeval state: the stream has found new routes that circumvent old, heavily silted mill ponds; blow-downs and deadfalls block even a canoe's narrow passage; and the few houses that can be seen from the river are scattered and distant.

While Casey relied on his lifelong acquaintance with the Neuse River for his All in One River, documenting the much shorter Trent required far more time and effort. But with the aid of Trent River denizens—his "paddle partner," Eric Layton; Judge Walter Henderson; as well as others we meet along the way—Casey paints, in words and pictures, a vivid portrait of one of North Carolina's most natural wonders. As he notes, "The Trent River is an encyclopedia and a bible, offering both knowledge and the opportunity to acquire wisdom. Not just for recreation, it's a visual essay to stir the senses, a place for man to re-create himself."

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