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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Reflections in Bullough's Pond: Economy and Ecosystem in New England. By Diana Muir. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000). Pp. 312. Index. Cloth. \$26.

In her introduction to *Reflections in Bullough's Pond*, Diana Muir accurately describes her book as a paean to New England's ingenuity rather than a jeremiad against the misuse of its environment. This is not to say that Muir is naive about the sometimes disastrous effects our economic activity has had upon the land. Much of the book is dedicated to a careful look at New England's environment over time: how it worked and how it has been changed. Muir, however, is as interested in economic activity as she is in the environment that fuels it, and at its best this book is a compelling look at the economic-environmental discourse which has left the New England landscape almost entirely a creation of our culture. She writes especially persuasively about activities and techniques—particularly industrialization—which have made it possible for large populations of people to survive on land never rich in resources.

Muir argues that economic revolutions, agricultural or industrial, come not from great wealth or from pervasive poverty, but from the fear of sinking from the former into the latter. For her, wealth breeds complacency and poverty despair, but fear of poverty in those who are well-off produces innovative change. She demonstrates this by showing how many generations of New England's young men, faced with the immediacy of diminishing standards of living, have created some new way of making the land pay. In this process of innovation Muir sees the roots of much destruction, but also the possibility of finding solutions to the problems we face now. She looks to this innovative spirit to drive the next New England revolution. She does not, however, seem to see that finding new wealth in a poor land involves revaluing the environment culturally as well as technologically and that this does not fit well with the wide historic sweep that she attempts to make in this book.

The flaw in Muir's argument is that she brings an essentialist definition of economy to her work and does not see that it too, like landscape, is a cultural creation. Economy for her is simply the use of an environ-

ment by a people to make a living. Cultural perceptions and limitations are not taken into consideration. In fact economy is not simply a people making a living off the land, but a people making a living off the land in a culturally accepted fashion. In *Ecological Revolutions*, historian Carolyn Merchant argues persuasively that revolution in New England came not simply from environmental stress placed on modes of production, but from the stress placed on society by economic production's failure to reproduce cultural expectations. The industrial revolution in New England was not simply a technological increase in efficiency, but a dramatic change in the way people conceived their environment and their relationship to it. Nature ceased to be a holistic, living world whose primary function was agriculture, and became a set of commodities which could be transformed, through hard work, into money. Farming, instead of subsistence, became industry just like shoemaking. While Muir deals with the economic, technological, and legal changes that wrought physical changes on the environment, she does not assess the reciprocal changes in culture: the way people see themselves in relation to the environment, which in turn effects economy. It is the nexus of culture and environment, not economy and environment, which drives change.

It is in Muir's early chapters on New England's prehistory that her economic essentialism is most striking and disturbing. In these chapters, focused on Native American life, she tries to ground her argument that revolutions come from the threat of decreased standards of living. As a consequence, she sees the disappearance of mega-fauna (mammoths, American horses, etc.), shortly after the last ice age, as derived in great part from over-hunting by paleo-Indians who then had to change their diet in order to survive. While it is true that the mega-fauna became extinct and there is some evidence of over-hunting, a causal relationship is not the wholly accepted fact that Muir presents.

More provocative is Muir's description of Native American development of agriculture as a necessity forced on them by population increase and continued overuse of prey animals. For her, once some tribes had taken up agriculture, allowing population increase, they took to expanding their territory at the expense of their hunter-gatherer neighbors. This Malthusian pessimism in human biology and Hobbesian pessimism toward human nature leads Muir to envision the beginnings of agriculture in America as the expulsion of Native Americans from the Eden of hunting and gathering. She sees hunting as a good way of living, but farming as endless drudgery and toil which fosters population growth at the expense of quality of life. The situation only became

worse, according to Muir, when Europeans arrived and introduced a market for fur into the indigenous economy. She explains Native American over-hunting, then, with an over-simplified argument about Native acquisitiveness and neglects any discussion of value changes in Native societies. She is, therefore, guilty of that mistake which Marshall Sahlins warned us of long ago: equipping the hunter-gatherer with bourgeois impulses and Paleolithic tools and then condemning him to failure from the start. This is the point: Native Americans did not view the world through our cultural glasses and did not view hunting, farming, or the fur trade the way Europeans did then or Muir does now.

Even within our own culture there is little justification for thinking of economy as a continuous set of ideas about the environment. It is clear that our understanding of farming changed dramatically from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. By attempting to show the whole sweep of New England history as a series of economic uses, changes in the environment, and technological innovation, Muir imposes her own cultural definitions of economy and environment onto other cultures. This is problematic when she writes about colonial populations and mistaken when she writes about Native Americans. One need not argue for Native American environmental exceptionalism to see that indigenous people did not commodify their world and did not view making a living in terms of that kind of economy. They saw it in terms of spiritual and human relationships that maintained life.

Muir writes well about the New England landscape and its changes over time. She also describes the technological methods used to make change in fascinating detail. But by looking at economy as a constant human activity rather than an activity shaped by cultural understanding of the environment and our place in it, Muir fails to find the meaning of the revolutionary change that has been part of New England's history or the avenue for finding solutions to the environmental problems we face today. It will be changes in cultural values, and not simply technological innovation, which will drive the next revolution.

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Maine in America: American Art at the Farnsworth Art Museum. By Pamela J. Belanger; foreword by Christopher B. Crosman; essay by William H. Gerdts. (Rockland: The Farnsworth Art Museum; distributed by University Press of New England, 2000. Pp. 256. 90+ color and 130+ black-and-white illustrations. Index. Cloth. \$55.00.)

One of the great benefits of the steady rise in the professionalism of Maine's museum field has been the publication of important collections. A notable recent contribution is *Maine in America*, a handsome catalogue of the most important examples of American art at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland. Established by the bequest of Lucy Copeland Farnsworth in 1935, the museum has built, through a remarkable series of acquisitions, an extraordinary collection of American painting, works on paper, and sculpture. To celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, the museum embarked on the daunting task to assess its 7,000 objects. In 1992 curator Suzette Lane McAvoy secured the National Endowment for the Arts award that funded initial research. The Getty Grant Program, the Davis Family Foundation, Mr. & Mrs. Matthew R. Simmons, Craig A. Brown, and the Henry Luce Foundation through its American Collections Enhancement program supported seven years of research and publication. The impressive result contributes not only to the study of Maine art in the United States but also to our understanding of the state's rich cultural history over the course of the past two centuries.

The book is arranged in three principal sections. Two essays provide a context for the illustrated catalogue entries and checklist of additional works that follow. Curator of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, Pamela J. Belanger records how the Farnsworth came to acquire such outstanding objects in her "History of the Collection." Beginning with Boston architect and collector Robert Peabody Bellows, chosen by Miss Farnsworth's executor to help carry out the terms of her will, it is clear the museum has many reasons to count its blessings. In "American Art at the Farnsworth," William H. Gerdts, an art historian with knowledge and love of regional artists, synthesizes the historical and cultural ideas that shaped the work of painters and sculptors from the early Federal Period to contemporary times.

Extended catalogue entries appear for fifty-nine artists; ninety color plates of oil landscapes and portraits, works on paper (watercolors, drawings, and prints), and sculpture illustrate their work. Seventeen contributors ably assisted Belanger. The entries—a biography of the

artist, his presence and role in Maine, and a discussion of particular works—provide invaluable information on many artists whose lives or works have not been well published or have been heretofore unknown. For example, Swedish-born artist Carl Sprinchorn (1887-1971) painted in lumber camps in remote Patten and Shin Pond. Assisted by museum colleagues and artists and Sprinchorn's archives at the University of Maine, Gail Scott produced a compelling account [p. 168]. Foremost among important discoveries are *Cattle and Distant Mountain*, Thomas Cole's (1801-1848) earliest known extant oil painting [p.46], and *Miriam the Prophetess*, a major biblical work of Washington Allston (1779-1843) commissioned by David Sears, the Bostonian for whose family Searsport is named [p. 68]. The endnotes reveal the vast quantities of primary and secondary sources used in these compilations.

Other works are better known and have been published recently. For instance, ten Farnsworth paintings from the Noyce bequest appeared in color in Jessica F. Nicoll's celebratory *A Legacy for Maine: The November Collection of Elizabeth B. Noyce* (Portland: Portland Museum of Art, 1997) and several paintings executed by members of the Wyeth family have been published in national catalogues. Instead of reprinting these works, *Maine in America* might have been better served by focussing on lesser-known artists. It is, after all, the scope and depth of the Farnsworth collection that give it its strength. One candidate might have been Charles Lewis Fox (1854-1927), who appears only in the thumbnail checklist [p. 207]. A friend of American Impressionist Frank Benson, Fox lived in Old Town for short periods and executed portraits of Penobscot Indians. A discussion of Fox and color illustrations of his portraits would have been most welcome. Other artists and works in the checklist could also have benefited from larger images, if not in individual entries, then perhaps in the introductory essays. It is clear, however, that the author must have been challenged by the entry selection and she has more than succeeded.

The book's production quality is a testament to what can be wrought with ample funding and a good graphic designer. The size (11 1/2 x 9-inch pages) allows for many full-page color illustrations within the entries. This luxurious use of space is appealing and enhances the individual works of art. The book is well organized, and the notes to the reader, entries, checklist, endnotes, and index are all well done. *Maine in America* should anticipate a long life of hard use by readers interested in Maine's cultural heritage.

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