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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Up River: The Story of a Maine Fishing Community, by Olive Pierce, with word pictures by Carolyn Chute. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1996. Pp. 119. Photographs. Paper. \$19.95.)

Up river, by Olive Pierce, is not a work of history, but a book that provides some of the raw material for future history. Following in the great tradition established a century ago by Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, it is a photo documentary dealing in a starkly realistic way with the lives of ordinary people – in this case the fisher folk of Dutch Neck in the town of Nobleboro, where the Medomak River empties into midcoast Maine's Muscongus Bay.

Using an approach pioneered by Depression-era photo-journalists James Agee and Walker Evans (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), Pierce focuses on selected working-class families, primarily the Carters and Harveys, and follows their hardscrabble day-to-day activities over a period of time. By means of penetrating, black-and-white photos (sixty-three in all) and a supporting twenty-three-page text, she portrays with a sensitive eye and an eloquent pen the survival struggle of these fishing families in the increasingly harsh economic climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The book touches only tangentially on the specific working aspects of the fishermen's lives afloat, concentrating instead on their social and familial relationships, domestic pursuits, customs and mores, and personal fortunes – in short, their way of life. That way of life, explained and illustrated through a delicate interplay of text and photographs, is further amplified by interspersed verses of poetry, or "word pictures," by novelist Carolyn Chute, incorporating the spirit and vernacular of the subjects. In the process, the reader/viewer is informed about such diverse topics as the community's children and their

upbringing, the role of women in the society, the character of rural poverty, the fierce competition between rival fishermen, the recent phenomenon of drug smuggling, and the universal appeal of lobster boat races.

This fine collaborative effort raises some questions and wets the appetite for additional information. Concentrating as it does on the shore rather than the sea, the book generally neglects the economic and technical side of the inshore fisheries; readers will have to find that elsewhere. There is also the matter of how accurately the families of “the Neck” represent Maine’s coastal fishing population as a whole. Indeed, they appear both poorer and less socially and politically conservative than the stereotypical image.

Be that as it may, *Up River* is a welcome Maine addition to the emerging genre of photo documentation of North American fishing communities, heretofore restricted largely to Atlantic Canada. In addition, it is a valuable pictorial record of part of our present that may soon be part of our past.

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Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters Between New England Soldiers and the Home Front. Edited by Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996. Pp. 205. Cloth. \$29.95.)

While it is getting to be nearly impossible for books to contribute anything new to the massive Civil War literature, *Yankee Correspondence* succeeds in doing so. Most importantly, letters included in the volume provide valuable insight into issues of race and gender, as well as the effects of the war on the home front.

Regarding race, this volume documents soldiers’ views from a wide range of perspectives. Common white soldiers praised the bravery of African-American soldiers, but also ar-

gued that blacks were inferior. White officers commanding black regiments discussed the strengths and weaknesses of their troops. Other white officers described their black servants in demeaning terms, demonstrating that racism was strong among northern whites from all classes.

Perhaps most interesting, however, are the letters written by African Americans, particularly one penned by Thomas Freeman of Worcester. Freeman fiercely condemned the discrimination that he and other black soldiers in the 54th Massachusetts faced: "We never can be elevated in this country while such rascality is Performed" (p. 48). Freeman's letter is unusual, moreover, in that it is an original document from an archival collection, because such letters from black Civil War soldiers are uncommon. Also of note is a letter by Charlotte Forten, an African-American woman from Philadelphia who taught former slaves in South Carolina during the war. Primary sources produced by black women are scarce for all periods before the twentieth century, so this letter would be valuable even if it was not eloquent and detailed. This fascinating letter, originally published in the *Liberator* in 1862, is important both because of the race and gender of its author and for its content. In addition to providing excellent material relating to race, the letters in this volume illuminate the war's impact on the home front. A great number were written by women to their menfolk in the army. Such missives are much harder to find than those from soldiers, and their inclusion in this volume is another strong aspect of *Yankee Correspondence*.

In many ways, reading these transcribed letters is no substitute for handling the originals in the archives. Struggling with a soldier's handwriting on the yellowed page is half the fun. Yet, most people cannot afford to travel to archives across New England, and this volume features letters from all six states, thus bringing primary sources to the reader's study.

Incidentally, this reviewer enjoyed seeing many letters from the Maine Historical Society – material that provided resources for his M.A. thesis on Maine soldiers. There are several great collections in Folger Library at the University of Maine that

unfortunately were not consulted for this volume, particularly the papers of Peleg Bradford. No researcher has time to visit every archive, however, and this book does a fine job of representing all of New England.

Letters make up the majority of *Yankee Correspondence*. Silber and Sievens, though, have added helpful editorial comments about each correspondent. Furthermore, they opened the book with a strong introduction, which locates these letters in the broader field of Civil War history. Several wonderful photos spice up the introduction, including many of African Americans in South Carolina. Overall, this excellent book should be of interest to historians of the Civil War, of race, of gender, and of New England.

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