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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier. By Michael A. Bellesiles. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. Pp. 428 + xiv. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth. \$47.50.)

Physically immense and dramatically overbearing in life, Ethan Allen continues to dominate the historiography of early Vermont, casting his huge shadow over every other settler on that frontier. Born in northwestern Connecticut in 1738, Allen emigrated northward to settle in the Green Mountains in 1770. A failed entrepreneur and a contentious, blasphemous neighbor at home, he emerged on the frontier in command of the Green Mountain Boys, the armed resistance by Yankee settlers against the claims by New York and New York's speculators to the land. The Revolution provided Allen with the opportunity to seize Fort Ticonderoga and for his fellow settlers to declare their independence from New York as the Republic of Vermont. After the war ended in 1783 and Allen died in 1789, Vermont won admission to the American union as the fourteenth state. By then Allen had incurred the detestation of the Christian ministry for his confrontational deism, expressed in his notorious tract, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, published in 1785.

Michael A. Bellesiles vividly recreates Allen in all his flamboyance and bombast, but with a revealing and innovative touch of sympathy. This focus often rewards the reader. For example, Bellesiles offers the fullest, fairest, and most insightful account of Allen's deism and the personal sources of his infamous book. Far from being an embarrassing sidelight to his career, as previous historians have suggested, *Reason* was the consummation of Allen's ambitions for transcendence, through fame in this world and immortality in the afterlife. The author also reconstructs with empathy the most painful junctures in Allen's life: his prolonged and debilitating imprisonment by the British during the Revolutionary War and the deaths of his father, son,

and wife. These passages not only cut through Allen's thick bombast but reveal how his relentless self-promotion grew out of his personal suffering.

But these triumphs come at the cost of perpetuating, indeed compounding, the marginalization of all the other leading actors in Vermont's drama. No other individual receives more than cursory attention as names without any detailed characterization. Ethan's smaller but smarter brothers – Levi, Heman, and Ira – receive short shrift, as does their cousin and coequal in Vermont, Remember Baker. Although Colonel Seth Warner and Governor Thomas Chittenden held the levers of power in Vermont after 1776, Bellesiles treats them, respectively, as Allen's pallid rival and pliant pawn. The radical evangelical Reuben Jones appears only in passing, although his ideas were far more influential in rallying Vermont to revolution than was Allen's idiosyncratic deism. Allen's enemies – especially the New York governors William Tryon and George Clinton – are mere stock figures, ineffectual foils who are easily outmaneuvered.

Not satisfied with crediting Allen's real accomplishments as a provocateur, Bellesiles is determined to present him as the great unifier who gave Vermonters identity, independence, and stable institutions. In fact, Allen was anything but a unifier. Throughout life, he provoked controversy and division, equally passionate hatreds and loyalties. He was in his element as an extra-legal partisan, scouring the woods for recruits and for victims. He was way beyond his depth when Vermont had to create a constitutional order. Fortunately for the settlers, he was also out of the picture, held in a British prison. Without him, they quickly and effectively constructed a Vermont that not even his return could undo.

Fortunately, the author's touch recovers when his narrative moves away from Allen's glare, beyond the obscured middle-ground of the competing leaders, and rests on a generalized backdrop of the common settlers. In particular, Bellesiles recovers the importance of Vermont's diverse and fractious religious culture that, despite the neglect of previous historians,

is essential to understanding the region's politics. The author also makes a strong case for the importance of the court system to the settlers' economy and to the legitimation of Vermont's secessionist regime.

In sum, Bellesiles aptly describes Allen as a consummate ham actor, stealing every scene when he appeared before the public. His role was so effective that it lingers on in the historical memory, winning Allen credit, not just for his own important performance, but also for the equally important works performed by many other, subtler actors. They still await their due.

Alan Taylor
Boston University

The Salem Witch Crisis. By Larry Gragg. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992. Pp. x + 228. Cloth. \$45.00.)

Americans have always been fascinated with the Salem witch trials, and historians have been writing about that early brush with the occult practically ever since it occurred. As a result of the "information explosion" of the last two decades, however, academics have employed all means of economic, judicial, psychological, and quantitative analysis to accentuate and explain the unfolding of events in Salem. While this type of intensive historical analysis merits attention for the new knowledge it imparts, it has also continued what Gragg labels "the historian's old dilemma: history as art versus history as science."

Accordingly, Gragg has declined an analytical approach in this narrative history of the Salem witch trials. Believing that "history is first and foremost a good story," the author has rendered the large extant body of witchcraft literature in simple, straightforward terms, believing that in this manner it will become more accessible to "the general reader." Unfortunately, Gragg fails to clarify his conception of the general reader, for while the analytical constructs of authors like Paul Boyer, John

Demos, and Stephen Nissenbaum may be beyond the reach of the average high school student, they are well within the means of attentive adult readers – as exemplified by the popularity of *Three Sovereigns for Sarah* (1985), a public television production based on the work of Boyer and Nissenbaum. In addition, it must be said that this volume is based on previously exploited primary resources, and contributes little new knowledge to the understanding of the witchcraft crisis in seventeenth-century America. As John Demos wrote in his *Entertaining Satan* (1982), studying this phenomena should be “more than an exercise in parochial reconstruction. Comparison, contrast, pattern, even ‘laws of human behavior’: such are the alluring possibilities that beckon scholars to witchcraft.”

These criticisms aside, it is as a basic introductory novel for “general readers” that *The Salem Witch Crisis* serves its audience well. In presenting the story, the author makes clear to the reader that America’s pioneers inhabited a mental world radically unlike the environment of this century. Early Americans concluded that unexplainable phenomena stemmed from the supernatural, and as a result they acted on what they believed to be true, even though it may not have been necessarily right. The author asserts that the best way to “appreciate the unique experience of Salem Village is to explore the particular decisions made by the individuals involved and their consequences.” The people of Salem Village were dynamic individuals, Gragg contends, and their actions reveal to us that “people are not passive victims of historical change but active participants who exercise some control over their lives” and who help to determine the outcome of history.

Matthew G. Hatvany
University of Maine

Hard Times, Hard Men: Maine and the Irish, 1830-1860. By James H. Mundy. (Scarborough, Maine, Harp Publications, 1990. Pp. 210. Cloth. \$29.95.)

In this book James Mundy tells the story of the famine Irish in Maine, a struggle for survival of an underclass whose impact on society was unsettling, even disruptive, but whose contributions were considerable, if not always immediately discernible or welcomed by the native Yankees.

Irish emigration to North America was set in motion by famine, culminating in the wholesale flight of the late 1840s. The majority of Irish emigrants, although bound for the United States, first landed in Quebec or the Maritimes. Consequently Maine was "fatally situated" to receive these hungry and impoverished thousands by way of Quebec and the Kennebec Road (Route 201). Most headed for the boom towns: Bangor, Portland, Lewiston, Saco, or Westbrook.

Coinciding with an antebellum industrial surge, Irish immigration resolved a chronic shortage of unskilled workers for construction and mill work. Entrepreneurs grew rich exploiting Irish labor and poured the profits back into industry – thus did Irish labor act as a catalyst to industrialization. But competing native workers, artisans, mechanics, and small business owners considered the Irish worker a threat and a convenient scapegoat.

The Irish underclass did not exactly present a savory picture. Plagued by grinding poverty, they endured living conditions that hardly discouraged violence, crime, and disease. Drink and violence became a way of life. Mundy also discusses the political impacts and experiences of Irish immigrants, connecting them to such important developments as southern slavery, the Know-Nothing movement, the Maine (temperance) Law, and the Civil War. He looks at both the anti-Irish movements and the changing politics of the Irish themselves.

Hard Times, Hard Men does indeed tell a moving story of the Famine Irish in antebellum Maine, with objectivity, literary skill, and humor. The book is well researched and provides some much-needed and valuable elucidation of the trials of those who

made up the first great wave of foreign immigration to our state and of their role and contribution during a period of rapid industrial development and political ferment. Photographs, cartoons, and engravings convey the temper and style of the times and the focal points of Irish life. More coverage of the antebellum Irish of Aroostook County would have rounded out the picture. As Mundy attests, those who settled there, unlike the Irish elsewhere in Maine, were largely farmers. This aside, *Hard Times, Hard Men* is a pithy and substantial contribution to Maine history and is required reading for anyone bent upon gaining a full understanding of the people and forces that shaped the state.

Carolyn Mahany
University of Maine

Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s. By David J. Russo. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Pp. 281. Cloth. \$49.95.)

Between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, Americans developed an interest in their past. State historical societies were formed, and the study of history became increasingly common. State governments began to require the teaching of history in public schools. Dominating the national perspective in this antebellum history was the figure of George Bancroft, whose ten volumes of national history, written between 1834 and 1874, eclipsed all other historical writing of the era. As a trained historian, Bancroft was an anomaly of the era, having received a formal academic background in historicism in Germany. His nationalistic history was widely read and dramatically told.

With this scene sketched out, David J. Russo begins looking at those commonly referred to as the "antiquarians." These were largely men of leisure, clergymen, literary figures, and the like. They were intensely interested in their immediate environs and wrote about it using materials that many of them spent lifetimes

gathering – diaries, letters, and other documents. One of the best examples is Portland’s William Willis, whom Russo describes as the “most influential local historian in Maine from the 1830s through the 1860s.” From a maritime family, he was a graduate of both Philips Exeter and Harvard. For more than fifty years Willis was a leading citizen of Portland, serving in a number of political capacities, including mayor. A president of the Maine Historical Society, he also edited the first six volumes of its collections. His most significant work was a 900-page history of Portland, which even today, after 160 years, remains authoritative.

State historical writing is not neglected; Russo cites William Williamson’s efforts in gathering historical materials. Williamson’s compilers and sketchers were keenly aware of their limitations as historians, yet that did not deter the author from writing a classic Maine history still consulted today. Russo examines other pioneering historians of New England. He praises their devotion to accuracy and points out their emphasis on the heroic and virtuous. The author also reviews post-bellum antiquarians, including the quintessential George Sheldon of Deerfield, Massachusetts, who spent a long lifetime collecting bits of Deerfield’s past for his monumental two-volume study. City histories also capture Rosso’s attention. These pioneering works in urban history generally follow patterns developed by town historians.

In a chapter titled “repeaters,” Russo describes the work of late-nineteenth-century antiquarians hired by towns or wealthy patrons to compile histories of communities with which they were not necessarily familiar. The author discusses William B. Lapham, a medical doctor turned historian, whose five Maine town histories epitomize the strengths and weaknesses of the antiquarian approach. Lapham collected much data that otherwise would have been lost, but he did so without much of a discerning eye as to the relative importance of his information. He also colors history with his own distinctive viewpoint, judging historical figures as to whether or not they agreed with his strong temperance views, for example. Lapham’s style is often awkward

and his organization poor, but he is frequently consulted by those who wish to know more about the western Maine towns he so faithfully documented.

Russo concludes his book with chapters on the writing of local history for profit. These histories, compiled on a town, county, or city basis, were purchased in advance by individuals who sometimes submitted their own biographies for inclusion. Today we find these volumes helpful, when used with caution.

At the end of the nineteenth century, local historians increasingly emphasized literary style. Histories became easier to read, more popular, and less expensive; the focus changed from elites to everybody; storytelling replaced lists and data. Accompanying this tendency was the rise of academic research as the dominant form of historical writing. The founding of the American Historical Association in 1884 gave great impetus to this movement. Increasingly, history became an important part of college offerings. Historical analysis, national perspective, models, and theories became its hallmark. The old order of antiquarians, who took a personal view of the local past, had mostly disappeared by the 1930s.

Russo, a professor of history at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, has presented a useful analysis of the role of local historians from the 1820s to the 1930s. Those using this rich and diverse record of the past will benefit from Russo's insight into antiquarian methodologies and biases. Antiquarian history becomes all the more valuable as contemporary historians gain fuller comprehension of its pitfalls and purposes.

Stanley R. Howe
Bethel Historical Society

Woodsmen and Whigs: Historic Images of Bangor, Maine. By Abigail Ewing Zelz and Marilyn Zoidis. (Bangor, Maine: Bangor Historical Society, 1991. Pp. 192. Cloth. \$32.50.)

Bethel, Maine: An Illustrated History. By Randall H. Bennett. (Bethel, Maine: Bethel Historical Society, 1991. Pp. 242. Paper. \$39.95.)

These two volumes are welcome additions to the vast lore of Maine history; however, the Bethel book is much richer in scope and detail. The Bangor volume possesses a curious title. There is not much about woodsmen and almost nothing on the role of Bangor's Whig party. In the preface the authors state: "Primary documents, including newspapers, letters and diaries, are invaluable to understanding the past," yet primary documentation is thin. The book contains ten chapters, including early history; agriculture, industry, and modernization; commerce; transportation and communication; medicine, education and philanthropy; leisure; neighborhoods and family life; religion; military; and conclusions. The text is written largely around the book's extensive illustrations, taken from the collections of the Bangor Historical Society. The illustrations, which provide the basis for organization, are on the whole well-reproduced, and the final pages contain a timetable chronology which offers an overview of Bangor's transitions. There is an extensive bibliography; this, together with the volume's fascinating visual presentation, will hopefully inspire the writing of a more complete history of this colorful city.

Randall Bennett's history is an excellent example of local history. The author is well qualified, having written articles for *Down East*, the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, and the *Maine Seine*, as well as editing and publishing Stone's *Sketches of Oxford County*, Gould's *History of Rumford*, and Martha Fifield Wilkins' *Sunday River Sketches*. He has written *Oxford County, Maine: A Guide to its Historic Architecture*, and a genealogy of the William Fifield family of Ipswich, Massachusetts. He is curator of collections at the Bethel Historical Society.

This history reflects extensive research and contains a wealth of illustrations. Bethel is located in Oxford County and vies with Camden as being one of the most scenic and historic villages in Maine. The first settlers arrived in 1774; farming and logging were the main occupations until the arrival of the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railway in 1851. Tourism became possible after that date, and the wood products industry grew up near the tracks. Bennett discusses much of the town's history in this book, from mill sites to participants in the Civil War.

In 1966, the Bethel Historical Society was founded, and its headquarters, the Dr. Moses Mason House, contains a wealth of historic treasures, plus a library. This book, published under the society's imprint, is rich in the town's cultural history, which is perhaps best symbolized by William Rogers Chapman, who made Bethel his home while conducting the Maine Music Festivals each year in Portland and Bangor from 1897 to 1926. Bennett's history will long serve as a leading example of local history study in Maine.

James B. Vickery
Bangor

Dearest Father: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Frank Dickerson, a Son of Belfast, Maine. By H. Draper Hunt. (Unity, Maine: North Country Press, 1992. Pp. 216. Paper. \$14.95.)

The title of this book alone would probably draw many a curious historian or curator to read it. H. Draper Hunt's *Dearest Father* is a collection of letters written between the spring of 1861 and December 1865. These letters, written to Dickerson's father, are significant because they provide a first-hand account of the ambiguities of the Civil War as seen through the eyes of a Maine soldier. The Frank Dickerson described by Hunt is a diligent, passionate man, unrelenting in his desire to see the Union victorious

against the Confederacy. Lieutenant Dickerson also emerges in his letters as a human being gravely concerned about the plight of his fellow man. He is outraged at the power of injustice, whether it be racial, economic, or otherwise.

Frank Dickerson went to war at the ripe old age of twenty-one. He took part in twelve battles. Among these were Antietam and Brandy Station. He was caught up in the spirit of the Union. During these four years Dickerson learned much about himself, the Union, the Confederacy, and life in general. To his father, he communicated the horrors of the war of the century.

Dickerson was wounded and suffered a crippling illness; in time, his condition worsened. Eventually unable to fight, he spent the remaining months of his military duty behind Union lines, drawing upon all the fortitude he could muster. In writing his last letter in December 1865, he mentioned to his father that he anticipated seeing his native Belfast once again. This was not to be. In January 1866, he left Tennessee for home; along his journey, he became ill, and on February 17, at age twenty-four, the lieutenant died in his father's arms aboard a steamer in Boston Harbor.

Today in Belfast, the headstone of Frank Dickerson stands atop an old cemetery hill overlooking the city and the bay beyond. His presence, no matter how remote, still remains. H. Draper Hunt's book is a must for all those who have an avid interest in the role of Maine and its citizens who were part of the Civil War.

Elwood Watson
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