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Agreeable Situations: Society, Commerce and Art in Southern Maine, 1790-1830

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BOOK REVIEWS

Agreeable Situations: Society, Commerce and Art in Southern Maine, 1790-1830. Edited by Laura Fecych Sprague. (Kennebunk, Me.: The Brick Store Museum, 1987. Pp. 289. \$50. Paper \$28.)

In some respects this volume grew out of the Maine Humanities Council's Maine and Statehood Project (1983), especially the Inventory of Maine Decorative Arts, which was compiled for the project by Eldridge Pendleton and Laura Sprague. The focus of the book is on the ports of York, Saco-Biddeford, Kennebunkport, and Portland, and we are treated to broad interpretive historical essays and detailed descriptions of inventory items, matched by visual documentation, including little-known water-color depictions of vessels, grand portraits, miniatures, and other decorative objects. The exhibition pieces, including such items as John Brewster, Jr.'s full-length portraits and Corne's great oil of the bombardment of Tripoli (under the direction of Portland's Commodore Preble), are all given catalogue entries and separate discussion after each chapter's opening essay. The form continues throughout the volume.

Agreeable Situations is an extraordinary book on several counts. First, it is beautifully printed and designed. More importantly, it reads well and offers an abundance of information which was previously unavailable in ready form. Finally, it is the one indispensable source covering Maine during the Federal period, and all subsequent students and scholars will be obliged to utilize its remarkable information. Perhaps the most surprising thing is that this was all accomplished in spite of the involvement of four authors and a like number of institutions: the Maine Historical Society, Old York Historical Society, the York Institute, and, in lead position, Kennebunk's Brick Store Museum. The major criticism to surface so far is that the print is too small for some readers.

Editor Laura Sprague proves herself a fine editor as well as a good researcher. On the other hand, she had good people to work with. Joyce Butler, author of the excellent *Wildfire Loose*

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(1978) provides a solid overview of southern Maine economics in the opening chapter, "Rising Like a Phoenix: Commerce in Southern Maine." Richard Candee, professor of New England and American Studies at Boston University, expands on earlier explorations by Colby College and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission in his chapter, "The Appearance of Enterprise and Improvement: Architecture and the Coastal Elite of Southern Maine." This is again solidly researched and presented. Laura Sprague provides the next two chapters: "Fit for a Noble Man: Interiors and the Style of Living in Coastal Maine"; and "Patterns of Patronage in York and Cumberland Counties." Finally, Laurel Thatcher Sprague of the University of New Hampshire provides a deft exploration of the role of women in Maine during the era.

Using the written record and objects such as chairs, spoons, prints, militia banners, costumes, maps, and architectural drawings, *Agreeable Situations* makes the Federal period come alive. The book can be mined for information about little-known artists like Benjamin Greenleaf and John Roberts or used as a point of departure for more detailed projects. One could be easily tempted to follow the career of the great Prentiss Mellen or Asa Clapp in greater detail.

For the first time we have an all-encompassing survey of southern Maine culture — an interesting mixture of sophistication and provincialism. During these years, the national culture was widely decentralized, and merchants like Asa Clapp or writers like Sally Wood had an impact far beyond their locality. Rarely has local history been used this well to achieve a clear understanding of the development of the United States as a whole. *Agreeable Situations* sets new standards in the study and presentation of local history. One hopes that future volumes measure up to this example.

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