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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Living Past, Being the Story of Somesville, Mount Desert, Maine and Its Relationship with Other Areas of the Island. By Virginia Somes-Sanderson. (Mount Desert, Me.: by the author, 1982. Pp. 325. Cloth. \$18.00.)

Voice on the Kennebec, 1941-1981. Edited by Kathleen A. Martin. (Skowhegan, Me.: Skowhegan Community Action Group, 1983. Pp. 211. Paper. \$15.95.)

How does an historian bring reality to Maine history at the local level? He enlarges his understanding of the true essence of Maine as captured in the fragile beauty of Andrew Wyeth's frayed pink curtains wafting in the ocean breeze, as crystallized in the actualities of the common man by Edward Ives, as encapsulated by Charles B. McLane in *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast*, and as portrayed by Randolph Dominic and William B. Barry in *Pyrrhus Venture*.

He develops the ability to detect the presence of fallacy and misinterpretation in publications currently available to his community. His investigative instincts are piqued. He frees up his thinking; he questions old points of view. He becomes absorbed in the infinite value of the detail of lives whose totalities have created history. He resents the fact that the precise drawings of the town's ancient fortifications are presented with no roll of the men who laid up the walls and stood guard on the ramparts, nor the women who tended the cooking pots and bound up the wounds. He regrets finding etchings of public buildings with no listing of the architects, stone cutters and contractors. He calls into question the fact that the diary of a leading churchman, however venerable, is the only representation of the spiritual condition of the community. He censures the inclusion of page after page of minutes of town meetings

which include no poll. He is skeptical of the value of the report of the road commissioner which contains no payroll of men who wielded pick and shovel and teamed the oxen. He may feel let down by photographs of marching bands with no identifications of the musicians. He has, in fact, arrived at the conviction that in order to bring reality into full view he must present the actual people involved in their struggles toward success or failure.

As the local historian sets about to recover reality, he forgoes re-echoing thrice-told tales and lays claim to his right to know. He unsettles prevailing ideas with actual census records, town vital records, undertakers' ledgers, hotel registers, and military rosters. He provides maps, deeds, and wills as indisputable evidence of the early settlers' family names. He discomposes old notions of social life by bringing in diaries, memoirs, biographies, and genealogies. He disturbs contentment with newspaper reports of epidemics, fires, racial strife, poverty, affluence, and all elements of the human condition. He contradicts tradition with business records, ships logs and storekeepers' credit accounts and inventories. He flusters complacency with local ballads, tall tales, and verifiable tape-recorded oral history. He confutes false impressions with photographs, paintings, and etchings. All become grist for his millstones. The carefully documented result regenerates the vitality of the past in his community.

Evidence of a healthy community pride is *Voice on the Kennebec, 1941-1981*. In this volume a creative group of local historians, including Lyndall Smith, Willis Quinn, Helen Shaw, Aubrey Burbank, Marion Knight, Jean Carrigan, Shirley Richard, Herbert Paradis, Jr., James MacCampbell, Lucien Appleby, Mary Page, Ward Murphy, Thomas Martin, and Clinton Townsend have collaborated under the editorship of Kathleen A. Martin, to bring their town history up to date. They have picked up the strands of the history of Skowhegan where Helen Coburn concluded her two volume edition of *Skowhegan on the Kennebec* (1941) and have written of the continuing development of Skowhegan to 1981. This limited

edition of five hundred copies, attractively illustrated and efficiently organized, could easily serve as a guide for tourists in the Skowhegan area.

Voice on the Kennebec returns us to the historic Kennebec River, to the tragedy of Father Rale and his Christian Indians at Norridgewock, and to Skowhegan's first settlement at Canaan Plantation, where Samuel Weston's log cabin evolved to the two story homestead still standing on Waterville Road. The writers describe each of the forty-two buildings of Skowhegan's historic district. Photographs enhance the descriptions of Skowhegan homes and schools. Musicians, authors, and civic-minded citizens are honored. Skowhegan's pride in its First Lady, Margaret Chase Smith, is expressed by Dr. James C. MacCampbell in his sketch of her life. With the publication of this book, Skowhegan sends a message to other communities, which may be resting on their laurels, that history is always in the making and that recording recent and current history is the best way to get at reality.

Virginia Somes-Sanderson has reanimated the romantic history of Somesville on Mount Desert Island. Even her title, *The Living Past*, conveys her sense of the relevancy of local history. Her love for her subject is evident as she converses with the reader about early coastal exploration, British land grants, the beginnings of fisheries in Maine and the exciting days of the tall ships. She follows the Somes family and their neighbors from their discovery of the natural wealth of the island in 1755 to the present time. From their homes in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Abraham Somes and Eben Sutton sailed their Chebacco boats eastward in search of a place to carry on a fishing business. When they arrived at Mount Desert, canoe loads of Penobscots, owners of the island, boarded their small boats. Somes and Sutton negotiated the purchase of two smaller islands, paid with rum, and were given deeds inscribed on birch bark. Somes made several trips to the island in the next six years, and began a settlement on Mount Desert in 1761.

Somes-Sanderson's representation of the first permanent settlement at Somesville is a rich synthesis of many historical

sources. She poses questions and brings logical answers to puzzling aspects of events obscured by the passage of time, such as the description of a Chebacco boat, which was used in Somes' first trip to Mount Desert. Her research reveals several clues to the size and shape of this seemingly extinct vessel, which "rode the waves like a duck." She relates the happenings in Somesville to the activities of the surrounding Indian tribes and to events such as the beginnings of the colonial revolt against the British, the problems of loyalty during the Revolution, the world demand for sailing vessels, the War of 1812, and the golden years when Somesville was enriched by the lumber, shipbuilding, fishing, woolen, ice, and tanning industries.

Virginia Somes-Sanderson spent fifty years collecting and organizing the material for this book. She says, "It has seemed important in this book to expose old errors which often have such vitality that if they are ignored, they come to be accepted as truth, especially if repeated often enough."

This well-conceived book, with its appendices, bibliography, and index, is a variation on the theme of Mount Desert Island. It blends with *Southwest Harbor and Somesville*, by Nellie Thornton (1938), and *Mount Desert: A History*, by George Street (1926), to form satisfying spiritual nourishment for the seekers of identity who have forbearers from this island.

It behooves lovers of Maine history to champion the cause of writers of local realities. Consider as justification the idea that local history can form a body of information from which thoughtful young people may receive information about their roots, understand their heritage, be inspired to high spiritual and moral standards, and thus gain an understanding of genuine patriotism. It follows that youths educated to the realities of their heritage will be wiser voters and better leaders of our communities.

Geraldine Tidd Scott
North Windham, Maine

Nathan A. Cushman: A Rugged Individualist. Edited by Franklin P. Cole. (Portland, Me.: Casco Printing Company, 1984. Pp. 161. Cloth. \$20.00.)

Several years ago I mentioned to a friend that I was researching the history of Maine during World War II. "What do you mean *history*?" he replied. He then paused, shook his head remembering events of the time, and laughed, saying, "Well, I suppose it is 'history' "

Until the actual memory of events is lost to us, it becomes difficult to see them as history; and because of this, our weakest reserve of published historical information is that which is closest to us in time. Not far in the future, researchers will be asking questions about the nature and development of twentieth-century Maine, and the answers will be difficult to find. To some extent, the lives of politicians, artists, and writers are being documented; the real difficulty will be tracking down the lives of men and women who shaped Maine through business and industry. If the researcher is lucky, account books and obituary records may survive, providing an indication of the subject's accomplishments. But these facts would hardly begin to animate the personality behind them. What historian of early Maine has not wished for an autobiography of mast agent Thomas Westbrook of Stroudwater? Or an eyewitness account of industrialist John Bundy Brown? As important as these people were, they did not record their lives nor ignite the imagination of contemporaries to do so.

The new biography of Nathan A. Cushman finds a natural and welcome place alongside such volumes as Paul E. Merrill's *50 Years a Truckman* (1979) and the annual Newcomen Society monographs honoring local businesses. These works have done much to deepen and broaden our knowledge about Maine business people.

The Cushman biography, beautifully printed and generously illustrated with family photographs, is solidly grounded

in the combined knowledge of the subject's sons. It also includes a thoughtful, well written essay by grandson Charles S. Cushman. The effort was brought together in good form by family friend Franklin P. Cole. After a brief flight of family pietism that links Nathan Cushman to the Mayflower and to actress Charlotte Cushman, the book opens with Nathan's family moving from Vermont to Illinois in 1866. Nathan was born three years later. Seeking broader horizons, the young farm boy left for New York at the age of seventeen, agreeing first to remit half his pay to the family until his twenty-first birthday. He found work and a career in his uncle's expanding bakery business. Horatio Cushman, "the senior baker of Greater New York," drew into the business his own brother and seven nephews, prompting one family member to observe that "the Cushmans are all dough-heads."

True to this appellation, Nathan acquired his first bakery — and a wife — at age twenty-six in 1895. A few years later he opened a modern plant in White Plains. Spending summers in Maine, however, gave the young entrepreneur an abiding interest in Portland, where he eventually purchased property and became a resident. In 1914 Nathan founded Portland's Cushman Baking Company, which emphasized hard French and Vienna rolls. Such exotic delights did not go over well with down-easters, so he switched to soft rolls and biscuits. The reader will find interesting details about Portland business, the tastes of the locality and period, and finally about employee-management relationships in these complex developments. Much of this can be found nowhere else. Nathan purchased the Oakhurst Dairy in 1920 and founded another bakery in Lynn, Massachusetts, seven years later. In 1930 he moved in yet another direction, opening Sebasco Lodge and the Shore Acres Golf Course in Phippsburg. In addition to the complicated turns of Cushman's business career, the authors show us the man and his family.

Nathan A. Cushman never achieved the status of a "household name" in Maine in the way that Margaret Chase Smith or Andrew Wyeth have. Yet his products were never far

from the public's lips and his role in the development of Portland area industry are substantial. In bringing forth the story of this achievement and adding in much personal information about the man himself, those who wrote this book are to be congratulated. One can only hope that works of a similar nature, concentrating on developers and industrialists in all areas of recent endeavor, will continue to appear.

William David Barry
Portland, Maine

Portsmouth and the Piscataqua. By Peter E. Randall.
(Camden, Me.: Down East Books, 1982. Pp. 88. Cloth. \$8.95.)

Portsmouth and the Piscataqua, by Peter E. Randall, is an excellent little book for anyone interested in understanding current popular perceptions of history. It is a book of photographs, with some text, designed to appeal to tourists. It is not an unusual book; any city that attracts large numbers of visitors has something similar. In fact, it is because this book is typical — and well done — that it serves as a good example of commonly held views of the past.

Randall emphasizes Portsmouth's pre-twentieth-century architecture. As he correctly points out, the fine Georgian and Federal mansions and the early nineteenth-century commercial buildings downtown provide the environment that currently attracts so many visitors. People take pleasure in the sense of order and balance found in the wooden structures and in the rich color and texture of their brickwork.

The aesthetic preference reflected in this book derives from the Colonial Revival during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During this period, a rapidly changing environment marked by large-scale mill construction and mass production

prompted a reaction in the form of interest in early American styles and hand manufacturing. This interest was widespread, and especially strong in Portsmouth, where substantial numbers of early buildings had survived. During the 1870s, “historic” Portsmouth became an attraction for visitors to nearby seaside resorts, and since then various local people have promoted the “colonial” character of the place as a draw for tourism. Randall’s book is only a recent instance of a century-old practice of providing tourists with a way to envision the city’s pre-modern appearance.

Of course, Portsmouth today has ample evidence of the twentieth century. Through careful selection of subjects and precise cropping, Randall manages to exclude such things as automobiles, gas stations, telephone poles, and stores with aluminum fronts. In one view of Middle Street, he shows an impressive row of five nineteenth-century houses; the next building to the right, which is not shown, is a gas station. In another photograph, he positions the viewer behind an eighteenth-century-style board fence, thereby blocking the sight of traffic and parking meters and showing just the upper stories of the buildings across the street.

Through such techniques, Randall creates an environment that appeals to his readers. He gives them the Portsmouth they want. It is not an inaccurate picture, but it is a selective one. As such, it reflects some of the value history holds for many people in our society.

John W. Durel
Portsmouth, New Hampshire