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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Maine: A Bicentennial History. By Charles E. Clark. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; Nashville Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1977. Pp. 199. Hardcover. \$8.95).

In the past twenty years I have written seventy or so book reviews. Most have been routine – the book was good, bad, or indifferent. It used the sources, or repeated old half-truths. The grammar and English were elegant or tortured. Writing reviews was good practice. It was a professional obligation. One rather enjoyed doing it. Then came this book, and I have never had a harder, more difficult task before me. In fact this review is the fourth different attempt at writing the review, and even now I am not satisfied.

The questions multiply. How does one make negative comments about a book so well-written, or one in which the reviewers own work receives such acclaim? On the other hand how does one praise a book that misses so much of what the past ten years of scholarship could tell us? For those questions, once raised, are precisely the difficulty with the book at hand.

Part of that difficulty does not lie with Clark. The instructions to the authors of this series, *The States and The Nation*, written for the bicentennial, were to produce an approximately 200 page historical essay, personal in tone. That task is easier with a state such as Idaho, for instance, with a shorter history, and perhaps less closely tied to the national history. Thus Clark was set an impossible task. Other series, *The American Trails Series*, *The Rivers of America*, to name two, do not set that sort of task to their authors. They generally say, "Tell the story."

In fact, Clark meets his instructions very well. He does tell the story of the state in the 200 page compass, and it is a personal view. In addition it is extremely well-written. One wishes, upon completion of reading, that the name of the reader were on the spine.

The problems remain, however. A book of mine, reviewed originally by Clark, is given broad and kind treatment. One or two other books get similar treatment. On the other hand, other books by the same authors on Maine subjects are not noticed at all. In addition books by Edward Schriver, James Vickery, James Mundy and Earle Shettleworth, Roger Grindle, and essays by these people and others are not used. Clark talks about the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* in his acknowledgements, but whether he has read the essays published in the *Quarterly* is not obvious from his text. He mentions the work of the University of Maine historians, but only is familiar with one or two published works. A two-day trip, or perhaps longer, to Orono would have allowed him to read the remarkable unpublished research on such topics as Maine Indians, Canadian-American relations, the Maritimes-Boston steamboats, Bangor fire departments, the red scare in Maine, Maine politics in the 1930s, 1950s, and earlier, works on the economic history of the period 1830-1860, shipbuilding, the Civil War in Maine, the WPA, and the CCC in Maine, all of which have been presented as theses within the decade. In fact, this is but a partial list, but perusal of these would have made the period of statehood in his book much better than the rather routine, and somewhat error-prone version we are given.

Perhaps this is really the problem with Charles Clark's book. It is not written by someone steeped in Maine history through constant reading and teaching. His is a personal history, written by a native who has done some work in Maine history, but not that of a full-time practitioner. It is a well-written, enjoyable book, and

deserves to be read, but as an introduction, and a personal one at that. The less said about the photographic essay, the better. Such stereotypical presentations only do damage to the state, as they bear little resemblance to the real Maine. It is as though a New York camera buff were given one roll of film and two days to tell the Maine story.

Perhaps it is time to make a proposal. There are at least seven people in Maine who teach Maine history on a fairly regular basis. All of them or any of them could have written a book that represents the state of Maine history scholarship better than this book. It is probably time to do another Hatch, without the biographical material. I call on the Maine Historical Society to commission a two volume history of the state of Maine from academic, scholarly authors, to cover the whole of the state, to focus as much or more on the period since 1820 as before, and to deal with all aspects, political, social, economic, of the state's past. Such a work, if authorized, could be produced for the printer in two years time. What a boon it would be for students, lovers of Maine, and visitors. Starkey* is gone. Clark's book is our Starkey. It is time to do better.

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University of Maine at Orono

*Starkey, Glenn Wendell. *Maine, Its History, Resources and Government* (Boston: Silver, Burdett and Company, [c 1920]).

History, Records, and Recollections of Gray, Maine. Vol. 1. By George T. Hill. (Portland, Maine: Seavey Printers, Inc., 1978. Pp. xii, 411. Hardcover. \$20.00).

Town histories are a very special genre. Writing such a work is more difficult than a biography or even the history of a nation. Lives have action, aspirations, declines and falls, beginnings and ends, which are usually sharply defined. Countries interact vividly with each other; there are wars, wide cultural movements, and aspirations shared by millions. Towns, on the other hand, are apt to be studies in still-life. Change is subtle, seldom seen as particularly significant, and often of little interest outside the neighborhood. Documenting local history is difficult because information is often scattered, if it has been preserved at all. While professional scholars often rely on town histories to make more sweeping statements about state or regional affairs, they have traditionally left the writing of town histories to amateurs. Obviously, this can lead to building a thesis on quicksand. There are rare instances in which a professional historian has ventured into the field, a successful example being William B. Jordan's *A History of Cape Elizabeth, Maine* (Portland; House of Falmouth, 1965). Professor Jordan had the advantage of knowing the area intimately and was equipped to relate local occurrences to broader regional and national events. Hopefully, this professional approach is the tendency of future town histories.

Gray, Maine (formerly called New Boston) is an important crossroads town, that had its beginnings in the colonial timber trade, became a modest agricultural and manufacturing town, experienced a late 19th century economic and population slump, and emerged as a bedroom community facing some of the less pleasant problems of our era. Curiously there was never a written town history. It is gratifying to learn that this empty niche

has been filled. Sadly, however, we must at the same time report the death of its author, Mr. George T. Hill.

Mr. Hill was an antiquarian historian in the best sense of the term. A lifetime resident of Gray, Mr. Hill knew his town, its people, and its history better than anyone. He was a flesh-and-blood link between this generation and personalities from the century of his birth. Over his lifetime he amassed a large collection of documents, photographs and historical artifacts. Thoreau once wrote, "I have traveled a good deal in Concord . . ." George Hill could honestly say the same of Gray.

Born in 1891, Mr. Hill attended the local schools and graduated from Pennell Institute. He served in World War I and was employed as an RFD mail carrier in Gray. For as long as anyone can remember, he was considered "the historian," and in 1960 was instrumental in founding the Gray Historical Society. As a man and as village historian he was an integral part of Gray society. His obituary in *The Gray News* of 12 June reads in part:

"Ask George" was the familiar cry whenever we wanted to know anything, and now it is slowly coming home to us that we can never again ask George.

Anyone working in the field of Gray history was obliged to visit Mr. Hill: it was his town. John Holverson and I met him five years ago, while working on "The Revolutionary McLellans" project at the Portland Museum of Art. We were seeking additional information regarding Capt. Joseph McLellan, Jr., who had settled in Gray. Mr. Hill was delighted to be of assistance. He was a tall, bent-birch of a man, with a lively wit, and a profound understanding of the town. He pulled out documents and pew charts for our use and offered to take us to the site of the McLellan mill on the Collier Branch of the Royal River. We wondered if he was up to it, for he looked rather frail. He insisted and we drove out. Before John and I could

remove our suit-coats, Mr. Hill had plunged into the pathless underbrush and was half-way to the dam site. George Hill was a surprising man. From that point forth we regularly shared newly located information.

The *History, Records, and Recollections of Gray* is a tremendously useful volume. Too often antiquarians are splendid researchers and indifferent writers. Clearly Mr. Hill knew his strengths and weaknesses. By his own statement, the book is not meant to be a definitive history. The designation "Volume I" was employed in that hope that there would be a continuing study of the town by others and that companion volumes would emerge. He therefore produced a source book to serve as a solid point of departure. While Mr. Hill wrote well, and often with understated wit, he relied heavily on documents which are loosely tied together with his comments. In this way he kept free from the pitfalls of speculation. As the book's title implies, it is more of an encyclopedia than a chronological history. While there are obvious drawbacks to this approach, these are, I believe, outweighed by the benefits.

The cut-off point for the book is around 1900, although there is a good bit of carry-over. Nicely designed, the book has numerous illustrations (including line drawings by Warren F. Gilbert, 19th century illustrator for the "Boston Transcript") and is blessed with good maps. The weakest section of the book is a paltry bibliography. Mr. Hill ignored some very important documentary evidence which was available at the Maine Historical Society and the Portland Museum of Art. I know that in later years he was aware of these documents, but I suppose that the book had advanced too far to make substantial alterations. In hindsight, Mr. Hill pursued the proper course. Had he become bogged down in more research, we would not have had his book. While material like the Perley

correspondence (at the Maine Historical Society) would have strengthened the book, it would not have greatly changed what Mr. Hill had to say.

The book is divided into the following chapters: The Grant, Proprietors' Affairs, Settlers' Affairs, Two Depositions, The Town, Roads, Schools, Services, Industry, Military, Religious Societies, Social Activities, People (brief biographical sketches), and The Cemetery. There are, of course, appendices and indexes. Each chapter is veined with gold, although it is left to the reader to connect the information into a coherent, chronological whole. Mr. Hill liked to tell stories, but he proved not to be a romantic. In a workmanlike manner he kept to facts. In his pithy section about the Mayall Mills (among the first woolen mills in the United States) he presented the company history directly. Other writers might have been seduced into telling the story of Samuel Mayall, who built his tomb in a pasture in the firm conviction that he would be reincarnated as a sheep. The wool-baron's fantasy is appropriately relegated to the biographical section.

Perhaps the most useful parts of the work, and certainly the most enlightening to this observer, are the transcriptions of proprietary documents in the early chapters. A clear picture of the strain between the New Boston proprietors (absentee founders) and the actual settlers, emerges. Communication between the two groups was sporadic and often confused. While the proprietors were anxious to protect their timber rights, the settlers were mostly concerned with survival (even if it meant cutting off proprietary lots). The so-called "Woodland Rebellion" thesis is given enhanced credence by these documents. By 1771, a committee to report on "persons who make a practice of making strip and waste of the Proprietors Interest by cutting down and disposing of Timber" was formed by the proprietors. This group was resented by the settlers who responded as follows:

when they had mett together to consult upon the Business, a Number of the Inhabitants met together in a disorderly tumultuous and riotous Manner, and carry'd a wooden Horse with four Seats, and set it before the Door of the House where the Committee had assembled, and offered other Insults and Abuses to the Committee and moreover that sometime after Mr. Nathaniel Young and his Family being from home, his House was in a great Part oncover'd and destroy'd, and his Furniture exposed to the Weather by some Persons at present unknown, but in all probability by some of those concerned with the Riot . . .

Attempts to bring down the law from Falmouth came to nothing and the committee was apparently intimidated enough never to send in a report. In 1773, Edward Oxnard reported that the undivided lands in New Boston had the “finest growth of oak and pine in this Eastern Country” but that great havoc had been wrought. Such information provides a valuable key to events in the colonial backcountry.

Information on this order of importance exists in all chapters, and is seemingly not available elsewhere. The *History, Records, and Recollections of Gray* is the work of a lifetime, in the tradition of Hugh D. McLellan's *History of Gorham* and William Willis's *The History of Portland*. George T. Hill was one of the last of the old school of town historians and we are not likely to see this sort of book again. Readers are fortunate to be able to share the author's knowledge and love of his town. Though Mr. Hill has left an important and lasting legacy to Gray, and to Maine, he has also left a challenge. It will be interesting to see how future generations will build on this firm ground.

William David Barry
Portland, Maine

History of the Town of Burlington, Penobscot County, Maine, from Settlement to 1975. By Alan H. Hawkins. (Augusta, Maine: The Kennebec Journal, 1977. Pp. 262. Paper. \$12.95).

The nice thing about local histories is that they acquaint us with small towns we might never know existed. Alan Hawkins spent twelve years gathering materials about his grandfather's native Burlington (population 266). Throughout the book Mr. Hawkins quotes documents, letters, and a variety of other original sources. He is particularly skillful in his use of anecdotes in each chapter.

When the Revolutionary War ended, settlers began moving into the vast interior of Maine in constant search for lumber. Sawmills sprung up along waterways and were the beginning of many communities. As early as 1825 mills were operating near Burlington on the Passadumkeag River. Some letters of Colonel John Black to the agent of these mills are included in Mr. Hawkins' first chapter. Although lacking a mill of its own, Burlington, incorporated in 1832, established itself as a lumbering town. The Passadumkeag Boom Company, begun in 1838, floated millions of board feet down the river to the Bangor market and was a major source of employment during the summer months. This company was still functioning in the early twentieth century. Lumber camps provided winter work for others even though a man often emerged in the spring "with a full beard and a head full of lice."

As the author tells us of the early settlers' hardships in creating a new town, setting up church and school, and providing a social life, he very effectively introduces newspaper articles, account books, deeds, even letters from legislators to supplement the text. One interesting letter was written in 1888 by Socabasin Swassin, an Indian, who recounts a battle between the Penobscots and Mohawks, fought on the Passadumkeag at the Saponac in

the eighteenth century. One learns something of Indian life from Mr. Swassin and of the sad fact that only 450 Penobscot Indians remained by 1880.

The most fascinating chapter is on the Civil War. In a reprint of a 1961 article, an aged Algernon Miller describes very vividly his war experience as a teenage Union soldier. Mr. Miller was a master of the thumbnail sketch. While on sentry duty, he saw General Grant sitting on a log eating raw pork and hardtack. Grant asked Miller his opinions on rations, rats and the likelihood of taking Port Hudson. Jefferson Davis, whom Miller guarded on the way to Fortress Monroe, was a man who never smiled much, but added the Burlington man, "he was in no position to smile." Another soldier from Burlington, Dr. Charles Hubbard, wrote poignant letters home to his wife testifying to the grim business of war.

The book contains many photographs, some good (especially those of Civil War veterans including Dr. Hubbard), some not too clear. The second chapter, "Early Settlers," includes too much genealogy to suit me but should delight genealogists. Census buffs can pour over the statistics in the appendix.

Mr. Hawkins states that Lowell, a neighboring community (population 132) has a history directly related to Burlington, and he plans to write its story in another book. If Lowell's history is as well-done as Burlington's, readers will have the pleasure of coming to know still one more small community in Maine.

Sherilyn R. Dietrich
Pownal, Maine

Charlie York, Maine Coast Fisherman. By Harold B. Clifford.
(Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing Co.,
1974. Pp. ix, 155. Hardcover. \$8.95).

Charlie York, Maine Coast Fisherman, is a biography of Charles M. York, lifelong resident of Maine, and a fisherman for most of his life. It is an account of his ups and downs, both personally and professionally, from his marriage to the woman he loved to the death of his father who was lost at sea. The book covers in detail all the types of fishing methods he used and often mentions not only his good catches but also his “dub sets” – an expression used by fishermen to describe a failure.

The book was written by Harold Clifford of Winthrop, Maine. Mr. Clifford is a well-known educator, having been a teacher in many school systems around the State of Maine. He holds both bachelor's and master's degrees from Bates College and he has an honorary doctorate from the University of Maine. One of the most difficult things which Mr. Clifford attempted, and was fairly successful at, was capturing the flavor of the “Down East” vernacular. Having been born and reared in Machias, in the heart of “Downeast” Maine, I know how difficult this task can be. There are many words and phrases which simply cannot be written. Words such as boat or road are impossible to write as a downeaster would speak them. Our habit of making a one-syllable word, such as shore, into a two-syllable word could give a writer fits. Some of the words and expressions Charlie used are quite regional, and not commonly used in other areas of Maine. Words such as “orts,” “rusticators,” and low “dreen” tide are familiar to me, even though nearly 200 miles separates Charlie's town from mine.

Charlie York was a simple man, an honest man. He was also a religious man and quite superstitious. This is a common trait among Maine fishermen. When they are out

at sea risking life and limb, it is easy to understand why fishermen would rather not take a chance on offending any of the unknown forces.

I was surprised to read that Charlie was once a member of the Ku Klux Klan. When he spoke of it as being an association of good fellowship, I thought he was even more simple than he made himself out to be. Then he realized what he had gotten into and left the organization. Thus, he was vindicated in my opinion.

Having spent many years as a conservation officer in Maine, I am familiar with many of the places and people Charlie mentions. There is Elroy Johnson, a Bailey Island fisherman. When Victor Kahill created his famous statue of a Maine lobsterman, Elroy Johnson was used as his model. His statue now stands in the Canal Plaza in Portland. Warden Danny Davis was a fine man who I knew well, and, in fact, trained under when I just became a Maine Coastal Warden.

No landsman can fully appreciate the hardships of being a fisherman but I think Mr. Clifford and Charlie have done a very good job of describing what it is like. This is an excellent piece of oral history and I recommend it to anyone who wants to know what being a Maine coast fisherman is all about.

Kendall Morse
South Portland, Maine