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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Foster, Benjamin Browne. *Down East Diary*. Edited by Charles H. Foster. Orono, University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975. \$10.95.

The diary of a private individual was once considered to be excellent historical source material. It was not quite history "from the bottom up" (diarists were not likely to be at the bottom), but it was seen as history the way the ordinary man might see it. Sometimes the obvious virtues of a diary might raise it to the level of classic document as Chestnut's *Diary from Dixie*. Recently, however, the rather narrow appeal of most diaries and the economic realities of publishing have made the diary an endangered species akin to the bald eagle and the whooping crane. This is especially true in Maine; to my knowledge, this volume is the first Maine diary since the *Journal of Hezekiah Prince, Jr.* was published a decade ago. There may have been others, but my point is that there has been a dearth of diaries. Diary enthusiasts therefore should welcome the appearance of this volume and hope that it is a foretaste of the future.

Foster began his diary in Orono in 1847 at the age of fifteen, and continued it until 1853, the middle of his third year at Bowdoin College. It is a legitimate question whether one so young could have had enough interesting and significant things to write to justify publishing a diary of this size. Fortunately the answer is yes. Ben Foster was either a very precocious young man or precocity was very much the character of mid-nineteenth century tennagers. And speaking of youth, some of the more valuable material in the diary serves to illustrate, long before the concept of adolescence was invented, that the transition to adulthood could involve pain and difficulty, and that Ben

had to grapple with several of the same problems that confront adolescents today.

In family and education, Foster represented less than the top stratum of Orono and Bangor society. His parents were a respectable middle-class couple from the Augusta area who settled in Orono in 1827. Cony Foster set up a general store, did some farming, served as a town official, and sired six children, the second of whom was our diarist. Ben's occasional expression of class resentment is typified in the following entry:

I understand that the young people of this place sailed in the new Mattawamkeag steamer as far as the Point yesterday. Charles and I, of course, knew nothing about it. There is a circle of Orono society I do not enter, an "upper tenth" with which I do not fellowship (p. 124).

As he began his diary, Ben was uncertain about his future but had no intention of going on to college. Having completed his formal education at Hampden Academy, he was about to be apprenticed to a storekeeper in Bangor at \$1 per week and board. After a few months of this his parents arranged for him to tend store for his uncles at Weston in southern Aroostook County. This store was pretty much a trading post for the lumbering interests around Grand Lake, and life was relatively uncivilized compared with Bangor. Ben seemed to enjoy himself, however, and in one of the more amusing and suggestive passages in his diary he records that

the buxom, blooming Mrs. Shaw [17 years old] whose husband was a "gent of thirty-five or forty," sent a message to "Benjamin, the passionless, pure Joseph of a clerk, that he *might come down and sleep with her* [author's italics] . . . An answer was returned. What it was deponent declineth to say [p. 109].

Ben returned to Orono in mid-1848 and spent the next year or so at home, while making frequent visits to Bangor and an occasional trip to Boston by steamer. In the fall of 1849, he accepted a clerkship in a Newburyport, Mass., drygoods store, and there during the first half of 1850, he

was involved in a number of “flirtations” and enjoyed an active love-life in courting several local young ladies. Needless to say, this portion makes lively and amusing reading, and reveals that social relations between the sexes were much freer and more open than I had supposed. At this point (July, 1850), the diary has already run to 300 pages and has covered just over three years of Ben’s life.

There is a gap of almost a year in the manuscript diaries, and when the record begins again in June, 1851, we find Ben enrolled at Bowdoin College intending a career as an Episcopal clergyman. How did this happen? There has been no inkling of it before. Ben frequently pondered his future but his objectives seemed to have been most secular and materialistic. For example, he wrote on several occasions of his “irresistible impulse to wealth” and his “inordinate, inexorable wealth-ambition.” In any case, the Bowdoin portion of the diary—including also descriptions of school teaching stints at Gardiner and at Hope—takes only about sixty pages of text to cover almost two and a half years. It is not clear whether the editor pruned this material more vigorously or whether Ben simply made fewer entries for this period.

This, then, is the backdrop against which Ben constructs a vivid, absorbing, and almost panoramic picture of life in northern New England, ranging from the relatively primitive in Aroostook to the surprisingly elaborate in Bangor. His prose tends to be a bit inflated but this is seldom distracting and the basic tone of the diary is pleasant. Space does not permit an adequate sampling of the entries, the best of which are lengthy. The broad range of topics mentioned and discussed in the text can perhaps be indicated by listing some of the major categories that the editor has included in his index: Bowdoin, Business, Clothing, Crime, Deaths and Funerals, Entertainments (public and private), Reading, Writing, Convictions and Responses, Love and Sex, Medicine and Diseases,

Phrenology, Religion, Slavery, Temperance, and Transportation. Each of these topics is mentioned at least a dozen times and some of them many times that. In addition to these topics, hundreds of people are mentioned by name and some of the names are well-known: The Washburns, Melville Fuller, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, to mention only a few. The index enhances the utility of the book for the social historian but it seems a bit skimpy in the listing of names. Ben mentioned two people in the text whom I had knowledge of from other sources: David Bugbee, a Bangor bookseller and printer, and Charles Lowell, a “half-crazed Ellsworth lawyer”; neither one was listed in the index. There is perhaps a touch of irony in the fact that this attractively constructed book was bound at Dillingham Bindery, a firm co-founded by David Bugbee in 1854.

The author’s grandson, Charles H. Foster, a retired professor of English and American literature now living in Virginia, has pared the manuscript to about one third of its original length. He has prepared short introductions of a page or two for each of the six segments into which he has divided the text. His explanatory footnotes are useful and unobtrusive, and he has provided an epilogue to explain the highlights of Ben’s post-diary career. I would raise a minor objection to the generally fine job of editing, namely, Professor Foster’s claim that the book is “a true diary of the American Renaissance.” It strikes me that the use of this essentially literary concept is a needless straining after an interpretative framework that adds nothing and may be wrong. No harm is done, however, unless the editor has used literary rather than historical standards in selecting the materials to be published.

It has been well said that Virginia is a state of mind; so is “Down East,” a psychological, more than a geographic entity. There is very little in the text, however, that could be called Down East as that term is understood currently.

There is almost nothing of maritime interest for example, nor does Ben Foster appear to have had any strong sense of place or identity with Maine (or even Orono), a critical Down East trait. Perhaps the title will have an appeal in the giftshops and bookstores that will bring it to more people than if it had a more pedestrian title. This would be all to be good; the diary could be read and enjoyed by a far wider audience than is ever likely to see it.

My criticisms are minor and should in no way detract from the qualities of this book. In emphasizing its usefulness for the historian, I have neglected the more important fact that the book can be read for enjoyment by the historically-inclined reader and will enhance his understanding and appreciation of the period it covers, even though it may have no "practical" value. This was certainly true in my own case; I found several new insights, and both confirmed and contradicted certain notions that I had held.

I do not mean to suggest that this is an important book in the scholarly sense; it is rather a modest but solid contribution to Maine history. I would rate it at least on a par with the *Prince* journals in both utility and intrinsic readability. It should be in every library making any pretense to a Maine Collection and should be read by anyone with even a dilettante's interest in Maine history. The editor and the University of Maine Press are to be commended. It is hoped that similar materials will be published in the near future.

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Banks, Ronald F., compiler. *Maine during the Federal and Jeffersonian Period: A Bibliographical Guide*. Portland, Maine Historical Society, 1974. \$4.00.

Maine During the Federal and Jeffersonian Period: A Bibliographic Guide by Professor Ronald F. Banks of the University of Maine at Orono is designed to serve the student and researcher interested in Maine history during the Early National period. This guide, accordingly, spans the period between 1788 and 1820, when Maine achieved statehood. The fact that Maine was part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts during this era presents a particular problem to the bibliographer. Much useful material pertaining to the state appears in works that give no hint of this in their titles. Dr. Banks has been especially careful to include such materials in his succinctly annotated references.

A number of significant titles relating mainly to national affairs have been excluded, unless, like Brant's biography of Madison, they include frequent reference to Maine figures or developments. Banks recognizes that all readers may not agree with the organizational framework of this bibliography, but he has chosen the framework which he feels best serves the varied interests of those studying and researching Maine history. The guide is divided into three sections. Part I includes basic sources by types for the entire period covered. This section includes: works for the general reader; general histories; bibliographies and research aids; manuscript collections; newspapers; journals and diaries; autobiographies, biographies and memoirs; printed collections, journals and documents; government documents and records; federal government publications; maps; statistical surveys; and carefully selected local histories.

Part II provides a bibliography by subject categories, again covering the entire period. Here are included:

description and travel; economic life and activity (with numerous sub-sections); social, cultural and religious developments (with usual emphasis on education and religious history); and the inevitable politics. Part III consists of a listing by topics which generally do not cover the entire period. This last section is divided into sources on the federal constitution; politics (Federalist party and politics, Jeffersonian Democracy and the political history of Massachusetts); the Separation Movement; the Constitutional Convention of 1819; the Missouri Compromise; neutral rights and the embargo controversy; several sub-sections on the War of 1812; and a catch-all miscellaneous section dealing with topics ranging from crime and punishment to the Leval Colony. Certain key works cutting across a number of subjects or topics are frequently cited.

This useful bibliography is the by-product of Banks' own research. The bibliographer is well known for his *Maine Becomes a State* and his widely-used book of readings on Maine history. Deserved thanks go to the Maine Historical Society and its Director, Gerald Morris, for the continuing high standards of the Maine History Bibliographic Guide Series.

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Rolde, Neil. *York Is Living History*. Brunswick, Harpswell Press, 1975. \$4.95.

Few towns in Maine have been as fortunate as York in their historians, and only a few can match what York offers in the totality of its historic, scenic, and architectural gifts. The town is not spectacular, arresting, or astonishing. It is, however, varied, cohesive, and as pleasant as a summer's day that has lasted for three centuries.

The town has seen great changes within the lifetime of its present residents. Some of its oldest surnames have disappeared, and properties long retained in old families have passed to those who have chosen York as their homes. It is impressive to see how much York, like many a New England town, owes to those who have come from elsewhere, a revitalization born from rediscovery. The woman who sparked historic preservation in York was from Chicago; her daughter, from New York City, fostered the effort and later endowed it. Most of the restoration of old houses has been accomplished by owners not native to the state. Likewise, of York's three latest historians, not one was born in the town, though they have come to possess a more intimate knowledge of its development than most lifetime residents. There is much to be said for involvement mingled with objectivity, perspective, and an awareness of what others take for granted, whether it be the bright blue of the water or a seventeenth century chimney looming through the treetops.

Within half a century York has had three histories, written by graduates of Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale, respectively. Each varies as widely from the other as does the town's appearance in summer, winter, and fall. One was written by a military surgeon, one by a businessman, and one by a legislator with an education in journalism. Each has noticeably applied aspects of his education and training to his research and writing. Rolde's book, for example, is redolent of the journalist's meticulous craftsmanship: the easy flow of the prose, logical transitions, carefully selected human interest incidents, local history related to its national context, an apt choice of quotations, a vigorous style. Without giving offence, local myths are undermined with finesse.

I picked up the book one sleepless night, as something easy to hold in bed, began reading on page 55, "The

Growth of Tourism,” and was unaware of the passing of time till the last page was reached; the earlier pages were read on the following day. This, by the way, is not a bad way to read Rolde’s *York*. One relates readily to what has influenced the contemporary scene; a long past era is afterward related to something familiar, even though newly acquired.

The historical research is sound and thorough. I doubt the pronunciation “Gorgeous” (rather than Gāw-jěs) for York’s chief promoter, but the appellation is worthy of the town, so why quibble? For reasons best known to himself, though quoting a phrase in it, Rolde omits drawing in detail on the remarkable description of York in 1640 in Thomas Gorges’ letter (MHS *Newsletter*, v. 16, no. 1b, Summer 1972, pp. [45]-50), possibly because of Professor Moody’s forthcoming volume.

Rolde’s book is the best introduction to York that I have found, and it should lead many readers to further explorations into the town’s historical background. The format and illustrations are well chosen. I believe that anyone who has not visited York will wish to do so after reading *York Is Living History*. He will also look forward to the next book by its author.

John E. Frost
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