

WRITINGS IN MAINE HISTORY

Books

Portland: A publication of Greater Portland Landmarks, Inc. Text by Josephine H. Detmer and Patricia M. Pancoast; Photographs by Nicholas Dean; Designer and editor, Martin Dibner; Project director, Jane Smith Moody. Portland, Greater Portland Landmarks, Inc., 1972. 236 p. \$6.95 softbound, \$15.00 hardbound.

Portland has long been taken for granted by its residents and overlooked by visitors to Maine. This handsome new publication on the city's history and architecture should do much to right the balance. Those who have known Portland all their lives will find much here to interest them, and those who are unfamiliar with the city will find reason to leave the turnpike for a first-hand look.

Greater Portland Landmarks undertook this project as a means of helping the public understand and appreciate the value of Portland's historic architecture. The ultimate goal is recognition and protection of the city's architecturally important buildings and neighborhoods, so many of which have been destroyed or defaced in recent years. The evidence presented here makes clear that Portland has an outstanding natural setting, a dynamic history, and a remarkable surviving treasure of historic buildings. The book deserves as wide a circulation as possible so that these assets will be given the recognition they deserve.

The publication *Portland* is a team effort. Conceived by Sally Sewall when president of Greater Portland Landmarks in 1970, it was executed under the direction of Jane Smith Moody. Josephine H. Detmer wrote the

text on Portland history that comprises the first major section of the book and Patricia McGraw Pancoast wrote the architecture text that makes up the other major section. Nicholas Dean took the photographs, and Walter Muir Whitehill of the Boston Athenaeum wrote the introduction. As designer and editor, Martin Dibner tied everything together. The result is an attractive, readable, and informative publication.

Portland's early history, related by Josephine Detmer, was full of disasters, but the advantages of the natural setting — in particular the excellent harbor — caused the settlement to revive each time and eventually to prosper. Known until 1786 as Falmouth, Portland was devastated twice by the Indians (1676 and 1690) and once by the British under Captain Henry Mowatt (1775). A period of great commercial prosperity followed the Revolution. Although halted for a time by the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812, Portland's commercial prosperity continued through the nineteenth century, particularly after the coming of the railroads in mid-century. Even a disastrous fire in 1866 did not stop Portland from growing and prospering. Rather, the momentum of the city was such that the entire commercial district was rebuilt in a few years' time.

Portland's surviving architecture, described by Patricia Pancoast, reflects the city's historical background. Few buildings survive from before the Revolution because of the successive waves of destruction and reconstruction. The boom of the Federalist era, on the other hand, gave Portland a number of architecturally significant buildings, many of which, such as the McLellan-Sweat Mansion of 1800, adorn the city today. These landmarks are not so threatened as the buildings of the mid- to later nineteenth century, particularly the splendid commercial

architecture that emerged after the Great Fire of 1866. The book gives proper emphasis to this period and to the work of architects such as George M. Harding, Francis H. Fassett, and John Calvin Stevens. Both the history and the architecture sections conclude their chronological coverage with the building of the present City Hall (1908-1912).

Nicholas Dean's photographs convey the character and variety of the nineteenth century architecture that is the essence of Portland. Yet the book contains, in addition to present-day photographs, numerous old views, maps, drawings, prints, and paintings (many from the collection of the Maine Historical Society). The design is not only attractive but also useful, for the illustrations are nearly always on the pages where they are referred to. The book's 236 pages are enlivened by a total of 210 illustrations.

Besides the principal sections on history and architecture, *Portland* contains a foreword by Landmarks president Charlton S. Smith, Walter Whitehill's enthusiastic introduction, a brief but revealing illustrated catalogue of demolished Portland buildings, a glossary of architectural terms, and a street guide to the buildings referred to in the text. Lacking are a conventional index and a bibliography, both of which would have been useful.

This is not the definitive work on Portland history and architecture, but it is an excellent introduction to the subject, and it more than fulfills Greater Portland Landmarks' goal of increasing public awareness of the city's heritage so that more of that heritage is not unnecessarily lost. Any quibbles with the book — for example, its lack of attention to buildings such as the former First National Bank Building at Middle and Ex-

change Streets or to architects such as Charles A. Alexander — are minor by comparison with the importance of that goal and the success with which the book achieves it.

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LEASE, BENJAMIN. *That Wild Fellow John Neal and the American Literary Revolution*. University of Chicago Press, 1972. 229 p. \$6.95.

“There swaggers John Neal, who has wasted in Maine
The sinews and cords of his pugilist brain,
Who might have been poet, but that, in its stead, he
Preferred to believe that he was so already”

James Russell Lowell,
A Fable for Critics (1848)

Professor Lease's book is the first full length critical biography of the man from Maine whom Poe once praised as “first, or at all events second, among our men of indisputable genius.” Such a close study of Neal as Lease here undertakes has been long overdue, for although, today, his subject's name is likely to be known, if at all, largely through James Russell Lowell's witty appraisal in *A Fable for Critics*, to the generation of writers and readers coming of age in the America of the 1820's, John Neal was not only a tireless propagandist for a national literature but also himself an active participant in the literary arena as poet, editor, fiction writer and dramatist.

It is these literary activities of Neal that Lease concentrates on in *That Wild Fellow*, as the full title of his

book would lead the reader to expect. As a consequence, the youthful years in Portland are not lingered over, although Lease does note that the straitened financial situation of Neal's childhood threw him onto his own by the time he was twelve (his father, a Quaker school teacher, died soon after his birth in 1793). Likewise, the long period dating from Neal's return to Portland in 1827 until his death there in 1876, is dealt with primarily as it relates to Neal's contributions as author and editor.

This nearly exclusive concentration on Neal the literary man, to be sure, is not without its failings. First of all, since it has taken so long for someone to devote a full book to Neal and since it is doubtful that more than one book on him is really needed, this reviewer, for one, would like to have seen a broader gauged study; one, for instance, which would have done more than relegate Neal's interest in Benthamism to a footnote citing scattered sources to consult for further information on the topic. This reviewer also would like to have seen something said concerning Neal's articles on art, essays which most certainly would have shed more light on his literary criticism, an area covered at some length in the book. Yet Lease scarcely makes mention of this related field.

The severe limitation of scope poses an additional and more obvious problem; to a considerable extent, it betrays the promise of Lease's main title. By so insistently trying to establish his subject as a central figure in the quest for a national literature, the author succeeds in making "that wild fellow John Neal" (the phrase is taken from a sketch by Nathaniel Hawthorne) appear as too tame by half. The reader is given Neal with the life nearly drained out of him. Indeed, the most readable pages of the book are those at the beginning of the Homecoming section which cover Neal's activities after

his return to Portland from the wider world of Baltimore and London. Here the Neal of diverse energies and enthusiasms comes briefly to the fore — the public spirited Neal who actively aided in beautification projects of his native city; the athletic Neal who wrote to Thomas Jefferson, suggesting he establish a school of gymnastics at his new university; and, most amusingly, the stubbornly perverse Neal who decided to remain permanently in Portland just to spite those prominent citizens who resented him for his harsh treatment of certain among them in the novel *Errata*. It is this section too that provides the reader with one of the few vivid first-hand descriptions of Neal, this one provided by a college student visiting the author-editor at the office of his vinegary periodical, *The Yankee*, which, during its brief two year existence, counted Poe and Whittier among its contributors. The student, as quoted by Lease, writes in open mouthed wonder:

My attention was attracted by a man about five feet, eight or nine inches high, with a fine head, light-coloured silky hair, robust, athletic, iron-built; in short, the man to make a statute of, every limb was so well developed, and there was so much manhood in the whole figure. He was in a strange-shaped jacket, with a vest after his own form and fashion, for he has all things made according to his notions, dictating to tailors, furniture makers, house-builders, book-binders . . . He was over careful and very neat in his person, but not a fop nor a dandy, for they follow fashions, and he sets all at defiance. Neal was then alternately talking with a lot of men who were boxing and fencing, for he was a boxing-master, and fencing-master too, and as the printer's devil came in crying "Copy, more copy," he would race with a huge swan's quill, full gallop, over sheets of paper as with a steam pen, and off went one page, and off went another, and then a lesson in boxing, the thump of glove to glove, then the mask, and the stamp of the sandal, and the ringing of the foils.

Such a bright description as this one makes the reader long for more of the same but, generally, he has to settle for Lease's more habitual practice of maintaining a safe distance between himself and subject.

However, a couple of points should be made in defense of the author's approach to Neal. In the first place, any biographer who wants to avoid a bloodless portrait of his man will find it easier to do so if he can draw upon his subject's personal papers, such as letters, diaries, notebooks and the like. In preparing his study, Lease has had to work largely without benefit of such primary source material, most of Neal's private records having been destroyed in the Portland fire of 1866. Then there is the specific difficulty any writer who stalks Neal is going to encounter, that is, the difficulty of penetrating the many public masks of this incorrigible braggart and self-promoter, known in his own day as "the American Byron," whose work he admired, incidentally. Even more than Byron, however, John Neal, in his life time, was at considerable pains to keep people at arm's length. He doesn't seem to have confided much in others, even members of his own family, who, in *That Wild Fellow*, seem to be distant indeed. Lease is aware of Neal's penchant for protective coloration when he observes that only the poet-pastor, John Pierpont, whose acquaintance Neal made during the War of 1812, was "exempt from the distrust he feels for others — and himself." And, as Lease further observes, even the closeness of this relationship diminished after a quarrel between the two men in 1823, shortly before Neal departed Baltimore for England.

Undeniably, then, Neal's biographer has taken the easier and more prudent course by seizing upon the Neal who is most accessible at this late date, the Neal, that is,

who vociferously proclaimed the cause of a viably indigenous American literature. And although Lease can be faulted even on this score for overzealously “puffing” Neal as herald, source and inspiration for American writers who succeeded him, he has come up with important revelations which help illuminate corners of Neal’s career previously in shadow.

The most central of these, for the literary historian at least, concerns Neal’s decision in 1823 to leave the pursuit of law and letters in Baltimore for England and his subsequent success there as the first American to be published in the prestigious *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Lease produces very convincing evidence that his subject did not so much leave Baltimore as flee it because of a stinging attack in his novel *Randolph* on William Pinkney, a reputable lawyer and father of the poet Edward C. Pinkney. Also, young Pinkney, it seems, before Neal’s departure, had him posted as a coward for refusing to duel over the matter. This information, if it doesn’t reverse, certainly modifies, the earlier commonly held assumption that Neal, in order to promote both his country’s and his own literary aspirations, stormed England with premeditation.

Similarly, by gleaning *Blackwood’s* correspondence of the time, Lease has provided the reader with a more focussed picture of this strange alliance between William Blackwood, the canny Scot proprietor of Britain’s most Olympian journal and John Neal, the mercurial Yankee exile. *That Wild Fellow* is especially successful in adumbrating the final parting of the ways between the two men, owing largely to the financial loss the firm of Blackwood took upon the publication of Neal’s typically rambling novel, *Brother Jonathan*.

In the end, the author's diligence at getting down the facts makes up for many, if not all, the deficiencies of his book. And, if the Portland reader of *That Wild Fellow* should bridle at Lease's ready concurrence with Lowell that in returning to his birthplace, Neal was exiling himself to a Coventry of literary obscurity, perhaps this same reader can find consolation in the fact that finally a book on "the American Byron" has been published by a distinguished university press.

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