

BOOK REVIEWS

John Neal. By Donald A. Sears. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978. Pp. 154. Hardcover. \$9.95).

This is the second serious biography of John Neal (1793-1876) to be published in recent years. The first was Benjamin Lease's *That Wild Fellow John Neal and the American Literary Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1972). In the preface to the new study, Dr. Sears writes:

... it is [Lease's] purpose to focus on Neal's role as a literary nationalist, and therefore relatively slight treatment is given to Neal's activities as a reformer, art and theater critic, and patron of budding talent. The present study has the advantage of previous scholarship and may accordingly attempt a fuller and more balanced assessment of Neal's long and immensely varied career.

No nineteenth-century Mainer more deserves a full and balanced biography than does Neal, and it has long seemed that Dr. Sears was a man equal to the task. The Portland-born professor of English and linguistics at California State University, Fullerton, has been one of our sharpest and most prolific cultural historians. His essays, including "Libraries and Reading Habits in Early Portland" (*Maine Historical Society News-Letter*, Spring, 1973), "Music in Early Portland" (*Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, Winter, 1977), and "Maine Fiction Before 1840: A Microcosm" (*Colby Quarterly*, September, 1978) have explored, in logical and inventive ways, this state's important contributions to "The Flowering of New England." Over the years, Dr. Sears's essays have shown a remarkable interdisciplinary assuredness. His knowledge of painting, for example, is based on solid newspaper research. During the first decades of the nineteenth century the arts were closely linked, often through the person of John Neal. Unfortunately, what should have happened did not; what we are promised in the preface does not fully materialize. To be sure, more of Neal's

personality comes through, but, again, the focus is still on Neal as a literary nationalist. All the cultural-historical knowledge gathered by Dr. Sears fails to take strong form. There is no question that Neal's impact as an art critic is equal if not superior to his role as a writer of fiction. Simply put, Neal's novels are no longer read while his criticism is constantly used by art historians. A number of his essays on art were long ago brought together by Dr. Harold E. Dickson as *Observations on American Art* (Pennsylvania State College, 1943). John W. McCoubrey's much consulted *American Art, 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965) reproduces Neal essays and terms the author "America's first art critic." No art writer of note has ignored Neal's contribution to the "Native Landscape Movement."

If it was Dr. Sears's goal to tie Lease's findings in literature to Dickson's findings in art, he fails to do so. *John Neal* contains less than four pages focusing on art criticism. Most of this weak section concerns Neal's relationship to Portland's pioneer landscape painter Charles Codman (c. 1800-1842). This does not serve to explain Neal's role in a national or local context, and the one dimensional treatment of Codman comes directly from Neal's writing. Few people have Sears's exceptional working knowledge of Portland as a cultural center. Drawing upon his knowledge of American literature, Sears tells us a good deal about Neal's discovery of Poe, Whittier, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and Ann Stephens. We learn nothing, however, of Neal's discovery of Joseph T. Harris, John Rollin Tilton, Harrison Bird Brown, Benjamin Paul Akers, and Franklin Simmons. There is no mention of the exciting and vitriolic critics' war between Neal and James Jackson Jarves that smoldered and flared between 1855 and 1874. Neal's over-stressed literary side serves to obscure his rather key and substantial contribution to the visual arts.

As a successful novelist, poet, journalist, athlete, attorney, architect, drawing master, historian, publisher, critic, orator, humanitarian, social critic, and speculator, Neal must be adjudged a complex personality. Each of these facets was an integral part of the whole Neal. The fact that he wrote novels was not isolated from his other interests but, rather, tended to elucidate them. Among other things, Neal's first art criticism emerged on the pages of his novel *Randolph* (1823).

If one examines any given element or interest of John Neal, it becomes clear how much a part of his total outlook each was. One small, nearly forgotten aspect of his career was gymnastics, but, even here, Neal can be accurately termed "Father of Athletics, in Maine." In 1828 he founded the Portland Gymnasium (with an official membership that included Jeremy Bentham, Robert Dale Owen, William Russell, John Fairfield, and Grenville Mellen), and he began the athletics program at Bowdoin College. But sports, as advocated in Neal's magazine the *Yankee*, were seen in their spiritual and democratic aspects as well as in their physical form:

One great object of the Gymnasium, is to educate the uneducated, with the least possible cost of time to the educated; and to teach our gentlemen that in some things at least, they are not a match for our mechanics.

The Portland Gymnasium, and its Maine branches, were initially successful as a democratic leveling agent. Worthies, including Neal Dow, Mayor Jedediah Jewett, and the Reverend Ichabod Nichols, did daily exercises with mechanics on Munjoy Hill, but Neal suffered a rare defeat when he tried to include blacks and organize female classes. Overwhelmingly defeated on the black membership question, Neal launched an attack on New England prejudice in the *Yankee* and withdrew from the gym. But aside from the social aspects, Neal's personal

exercises enabled him to work a full sixteen-hour day, a fact of significance in understanding how he accomplished so much in one lifetime.

While Sears's *John Neal* is the most complete biography of the great Portlander and constitutes a must for local bookshelves, it could have been better. The author folds up on the topic of art criticism, an area in which he is amply qualified to make judgments. His chosen material is largely literary, though more of the man comes across than in Lease's study. All this is somewhat disappointing for a definitive biography of Neal is needed, and Dr. Sears was fully capable of giving it to us. It will now probably be some time before commercial publishers will be enthusiastic about sponsoring another Neal study.

William David Barry
Maine Historical Society

Beyond the Spring: Cordelia Stanwood of Birdsacre. By Chandler S. Richmond. (Lamoine: The Latona Press, 1978. Pp. 155. \$7.95.)

Having visited Birdsacre and having read some of Cordelia Stanwood's ornithological contributions in A. C. Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds*, it was with great enthusiasm that I undertook this review for the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*. Here was the opportunity to learn about a woman whose careful observations of nesting songbirds constitute a significant body of information. Cordelia Stanwood was a pioneer of sorts, and her solitary efforts, carried on for so many years, established a firm foundation of ornithological knowledge still important today. Knowing of these contributions and being familiar with some of her excellent photographs, I looked forward to knowing her more closely.

Sadly, *Beyond the Spring* does not succeed in bringing the reader close to a real understanding of or insight into Cordelia Stanwood's life and work. The author's invitation in the prologue, "Listen to what she had to say and meet the real Cordelia Stanwood," simply is never realized. Perhaps it was the woman's disposition that made this task impossible. Though she kept meticulous field notes for nearly half a century, Cordelia Stanwood never maintained a personal diary and had few friends or acquaintances. Presumably insights into her life would have to be gleaned from her notebooks, but does not happen.

Chandler Richmond's profound admiration for Cordelia Stanwood seeps into nearly every page of *Beyond the Spring* and this is one of the biography's serious flaws. It is clear the author was not able to separate himself sufficiently from this mysterious woman. He lacks the distance to draw her life, its turmoil and achievements, into clear focus. The details of Cordelia Stanwood's life, her schooling, teaching and other facts are chronicled. But these are no more than the skeleton of her existence. What the reader never sees is the flesh, the heart, and spirit that binds all this chronology together.

Cordelia Stanwood lived a more or less typical nineteenth-century existence until her thirty-ninth year when she suffered a nervous breakdown. This was a pivotal time in her life when she turned away from a teaching career and returned to Ellsworth, Maine, where she devoted herself to observing and recording songbird behavior. It is clear that Cordelia Stanwood faced a major crisis that was the turning point in her life. Unfortunately the author chose to omit any detailed consideration of her breakdown. He sums it up sparsely. "Cordelia suffered a complete nervous breakdown and spent several months at a sanatorium in Jamaica Plain before she was well enough to return home. At thirty-nine her teaching days were

over. And the springtime of her life was ended." As readers, we learn absolutely nothing about the turmoil which eventually led to her pursuits as a naturalist. We never see the real Cordelia Stanwood.

A biography's central function is to draw attention to the subject's unique qualities and contributions. Cordelia Stanwood is not going to be known for her reed baskets or needlework. Indeed, her popular short stories about nesting birds, though interesting, are not especially notable. There is no question but that her significant contributions come from her careful observations and her first-rate photographs of nesting passerines. Had Chandler Richmond emphasized this aspect of her work, and quoted from the notebooks more generously and carefully, we might have gained a better understanding and deeper appreciation for Cordelia Stanwood's exhaustive research. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

If, as readers of this review, you have an interest in ornithology and are curious about this quiet Maine naturalist who spent so many years studying birds, then go directly to her notebooks which are available at Birdsacre in Ellsworth. Mr. Richmond points out that the period from 1907 to 1920 were Cordelia Stanwood's most productive years. Begin with the volumes that cover those years. If you enjoy reading Bent's *Life Histories* keep a sharp eye out for Cordelia Stanwood's contributions. And if you have an especially keen interest, read her old articles in *Auk* and *Bird Lore*. Perhaps here you will gain a real appreciation for this remarkable woman.

Peter Vickery
Lincoln Center, Maine

Aroostook Architect: The Life and Times of the Reverend Joseph S. Marcoux. By Miriam Therese Callnan. (Brunswick, Maine: Harpswell Press, 1977. Pp. 95. \$9.95).

In her brief biography of Reverend Marcoux, Sister Miriam Therese provides the general reader with a sympathetic portrait of a man still revered in the Catholic towns of the St. John Valley in northern Maine. Serious historians might question the objectivity of the author's conclusions in the section on the "Lasting Impact of Father Marcoux," but in so doing could be failing to recognize the human side of the special church-state relationship that existed in that geographical region of Maine. Manuscript sources uncovered in Eagle Lake, the archives of the Diocese of Portland, and in various locations in Canada have been combined with a series of interviews, tapes from the Oral History of Aroostook County Project (1972), and the usual, albeit limited in coverage, secondary sources to present a reasonably balanced view of a local religious leader.

The volume begins with a short discussion of Marcoux's Canadian career (1840-1890) and his assignment as "Missionary to Maine." His skills as a working priest are made evident in the author's treatment of the establishment of a convent school, the legal and financial problems associated with the Wallagrass school, the creation of St. Mary's Parish of Eagle Lake, and the building of Northern Maine General Hospital. The chapter on Father Marcoux's missions further indicates the difficulties associated with the seat of the diocese being located in distant Portland. Even at the time of his death, attributed to a Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, Marcoux was still striving to bring better education and improved health care to the area's Franco-American population.

This modest volume, along with Mr. Jim Ouelette's forthcoming history of the town of Eagle Lake, will fill a

gap in the bibliographic list of materials available on the history of Aroostook County.

Roger L. Grindle
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The New England Indians. By C. Keith Wilbur. (Chester, Conn.: The Globe Pequot Press. 1978. Pp. 103. Paper. \$8.95). *Letter to the Editor*.

Dear Sir,

While at the Bates College reunion this past weekend, I chanced upon the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* for the fall of 1979. Roger B. Ray had reviewed my *The New England Indians* (Globe/Pequot, 1978). Perhaps "review" isn't quite the word. Better entitled Ray's *Myths and Legends of the Indians in General*, he burdened the reader with three full pages of his views on aboriginal religion! Perhaps Mr. Ray should start a book on the subject, but his general overview of our New England tribes should *not* be included.

Legends, pleasant as they are, must not be substituted for basic archeological information, the actual artifacts, and contemporary colonial writings. With this solid foundation, the top thousand plus years of Indian occupation come to life. The basics of food, clothing, and shelter, living and harmony with nature, and the crafting of necessities from raw materials become more meaningful — and based on the available facts.

Mr. Ray felt that the book slighted the Maine Indians. He states that "... Indian life in Northern New England was different" from the more southerly tribes. And that was it — no references, examples or explanations! *Certainly* there were differences between north and south, east and west, mountain and shore, and so on. And I'm pleased to

say that Maine's artifacts, birch containers, canoes, quillwork, basketry and conical wigwams were between the book's covers.

I did, however, have a difficult time locating significant collections of Maine origin. And since they are not well known, I would appreciate any suggestions from your readers.

And so this brief review of a review finds little in Mr. Ray's ramblings that apply to *The New England Indians*. Completely ignored are the detailed and accurate pen and ink drawings, the successful coping with the environment, new advances of each culture, how each artifact was actually made and used, the import of European colonization and the artifact identification chart. Perhaps the reader will leaf through this book and judge its usefulness – without benefit of a middleman.

June 13th 1980

C. Keith Wilbur, M.D.