
BOOK REVIEWS

Dawn over the Kennebec. By Mary R. Calvert. (Lewiston, Me.: Twin City Printery, 1983. Pp. 452. Cloth. \$16.95.)

Mary R. Calvert set herself a difficult task when she decided to write a history of the Kennebec River valley. Probably no Maine river is more rich historically than the Kennebec. The first recorded attempt by Europeans to make a permanent settlement in America was at Popham at the river's mouth; Maine's most famous and infamous Catholic missionary, Father Sebastian Rasle, lived and died on the Kennebec at Norridgewock; and Benedict Arnold's ill-fated march to Quebec in 1775 followed the river's course. These are only highlights of the Kennebec's history, and even someone with a cursory knowledge of events on the river could quickly compile an impressive list of towns and cities on its shores and tributaries that have played an important role in the commercial, political, and cultural history of Maine — and indeed the nation. It is not surprising that Calvert will have produced, before she is done, a two-volume history. (*Dawn over the Kennebec*, volume one, begins with prehistoric legends and ends with Arnold's march to Quebec. Volume two, *The Kennebec Wilderness Awakens*, will deal with "the river towns from Bingham northward," and is scheduled for publication this year.) It is also not surprising that Calvert has not been entirely successful in meeting the ambitious deadline she set for herself.

Dawn over the Kennebec has the look and heft of an historical novel. The book's romantic title and the appealing painting, showing the Popham ship, *Gift of God*, at the mouth of the Kennebec in 1607 (commissioned from the East Boothbay artist Earle Barlow for the cover and dust jacket) lead the reader to expect the "good read" historical fiction provides. That element is present in the book's long chapters on New England's eighteenth-century Indian wars, but Calvert's purpose,

although not stated in a forward, seems to have been to produce reliable history. Hers is not the poet's overview of Robert P. T. Coffin's 1937 *Kennebec: Cradle of Americans*.

Calvert has tracked down primary source material and out-of-print published histories, from which she has culled information to mesh with more generally available history. In this she has provided an important service to her readers. It is regrettable that the book's eleven-page bibliography does not include most of these materials. Missing from it are citations for the journals of the early explorers and surveyors, the letters of Father Rasle to his family in France, and many of the accounts of Indian captivity that Calvert has researched. It is possible that these primary documents were quoted from volumes listed in the bibliography, but that is not evident, due to the fact that simple references to quoted sources have been included in the body of the text as a substitute for detailed footnotes. It is unfortunate that proper citations were not included in a book that seems to have been intended to make available, even to the general reader, scattered and forgotten history. To make such history "available" is not simply to quote from it, but to assist, with careful citations, in its full retrieval.

It is difficult to predict how this book will be most useful. Students of the history of the Kennebec River valley already have available to them a long list of histories; a number of good to excellent town histories (many of which have been recently reprinted); numerous articles and monographs about Popham; and, like all colorful stories, those of the Indian wars and Arnold's march have been retold many times over. Probably Calvert's sensitive treatment of the Abenaki Indians and her view of their culture will have the most lasting value. *Dawn over the Kennebec* makes a useful contribution to Maine Indian history, which in only recent years (as evidenced by a reprinting of Joseph Nicolai's *Life and Traditions of The Red Man* and publication of Willoughby's *Indian Antiquities of the Kennebec Valley*) has begun to receive the attention it deserves. Sportsmen with intellectual curiosity about the river should find

Calvert's use of the detailed journals of early surveyors on the Kennebec of great interest.

Readers who live in the Kennebec River valley will welcome this handsomely produced volume. Serious students of history will wish for a more scholarly methodology, but nevertheless will appreciate its contribution to the gathering in of solid Maine history.

Joyce Butler
Kennebunkport, Maine

*An Honest Woodsman: The Life and Opinions of Dave Priest--
Maine Trapper, Guide, and Game Warden.* By William S.
Warner. (Orono, Me.: Northeast Folklore Society, 1983.
Pp. 110. Paper. \$6.00.)

This latest volume from the Northeast Folklore Society is an oral biography of a woodsman, a figure that looms large in the mythology and popular image of Maine. William Warner is credited as the author, but it might be more accurate to describe him as editor and compiler for Dave Priest, for Warner has generally chosen to stand back and let Priest tell his own story. This is not necessarily a bad approach for a biographer, but in doing so Warner has given us an example of the potential weaknesses, as well as the strengths of oral history.

At its best, oral history can add a unique and rich perspective to our understanding of the past, giving us vivid glimpses of people and small everyday activities and events. It offers a slice of life that few other sources can provide. In this sense, Warner and Priest have been successful. But Warner has chosen not to go beyond this to provide a historical context that would allow us to see Priest's life as either an example of or exception to broader patterns of Maine culture. Moreover, although Warner speaks of himself as a folklorist, he makes little reference to the woodsman as a significant figure in Maine folklore.

Despite these drawbacks, *An Honest Woodsman* is well worth reading, for Priest has a number of good stories to tell. There was the time when young Dave was almost sent home from school because he smelled so strongly of the skunks he had been trapping — and the story about how Dave's wife trapped the trapper: "I started going with her in [her] last year of high school. So when it came to graduation they give a class gift to each one that graduates, you know? And of all things they chose to give her was one of those back-breaker rat traps. And that's what she caught me in [laughter]."

Priest was a warden, and many of the best stories are about poachers, including the ones who mistook his car for that of their accomplices and climbed right in. "I don't mind you fellows catching me," one confessed, "but for God's sake don't tell anybody how you did it." There was the farmer, irate at finding the wardens hiding in his barn, who blocked the doors with his own car and proceeded to demolish theirs with his tractor. And then there was the time that Priest, following up a tip about moose poaching, found the lady of the house in bed trying to conceal under the covers the jars of moose meat she'd been canning.

Despite such antics, Priest speaks fondly of many poachers he knew. "I have a lot of friends that poached some, and they knew that if I caught them poaching, I would do my best to see that they were punished. But still, we were friends" Often Priest's first choices to lead search and rescue teams were men who poached. "He may have been a poacher, but I know that he is a woodsman — he's a good woodsman."

Higher praise Dave Priest probably would not give to any man. Warner's choice of a title for this book is apt. Priest told him that he wanted to be remembered as an honest man, and his friends and family attest to this as one of his essential qualities. But it is the woodsman that we see and will remember. "My religion is the mountains, the streams, the rivers. To me this is much stronger a call than the minister in the pulpit," he tells us. And we believe him.

Warner has not fulfilled what I take to be one of the biographer's obligations: to put his subject into some broader context; to tell us why, beyond a gossipy interest, we should want to know about this man. But he has given us Dave Priest, woodsman, and he's done that very well.

Pamela Dean
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

An Old New England Farm. By William Thomson and Kenneth MacIver. (Cape Neddick, Me.: Nor'East Heritage Publications, 1983. Pp. 64. Paper. \$3.95.)

An Old New England Farm is a small book that provides an image of New England farm life in the nineteenth century. The illustrations by Robert J. Neary and entries from the 1861 diary of Ethel Porter provide a framework for a series of vignettes about various aspects of farm life.

Young people will enjoy reading about a typical farm day, beginning with a notation in Ethel's diary that describes a breakfast of beef-steak, tripe, hot biscuits, tomatoes, baked potatoes, and doughnuts. Older readers will remember apples like Northern Spies, Russets, Greenings, and Porters. They will be familiar with problems of making relish, piccalilli, and bread 'n butter pickles. The sight and smell of red flannel hash cooking on a woodstove is not easy to forget.

Whether the reader's goal is a better understanding of life on a nineteenth-century New England farm or renewed memories of rural living, *An Old New England Farm* will provide pleasant reading. William Thomson and Kenneth MacIver have written many books about life in New England; I consider this their best effort.

John D. Bardwell
Durham, New Hampshire