

BOOK REVIEWS

Chez Nous: The St. John Valley. By Guy F. Dubay. (Augusta: Maine State Museum, 1983. Pp. 113. Paper. \$7.95.)

This book is a study of the French population living on the American side of the St. John Valley from Van Buren to St. Francis, in the hinterland of Maine's Aroostook County. Written by one of the region's native sons, the book stresses the historical and economic forces instrumental in the settlement of the region and in shaping a distinctive way of life described as "down east with a French accent" (p. 13).

Divided in three parts, this bilingual publication presents first the geographical settings of the St. John River and Valley. Then under the heading of "A Time," the broad perspectives of international politics and economics are shown to play a key role in the creation of a settlement in the northernmost part of Maine and New Brunswick and in the eventual division of the region into two political entities in the nineteenth century. Thirdly, the Catholic Church and family links are seen as instrumental in maintaining the cultural heritage and facilitating a gradual adaptation to changing conditions of the local population.

Using late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century economic, legal, and personal documents, Dubay succeeds in telling the story of a community whose people were pawns on an international chess board. The result is an intimate view of a community, made vivid in the reader's mind. The French in the St. John Valley adapted to the transformation from subsistence farming to a cash crop economy (potato) in the nineteenth century. This influenced not only the lives of the individuals but also the community's architecture: construction of twin barns became "a symbol of the presence of French and American cultures" (p. 62).

The French translation is not on a par with the English text, and one wishes corrections had been made to certain awkward expressions and terms in the text. A third map of

actual villages, towns, and townships would have complemented the one on migration in the eighteenth century and a second on the settlement of the international boundary.

"St. John Valley living is a paradox," Dubay tells us (p. 13). Depending on which side of the border one is on, the perspective is dramatically different. For an American, it is a hinterland where further development is hampered partly because markets are far removed. For a Canadian, the St. John Valley is a vital transportation link where the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian National Railway mainline are within sight of the American border. Differences in the identities of people living on both sides of the border are noticeable: the Aroostook French stress their Acadian ancestry while the Madawaska French, in calling themselves "Brayons," play it down.

The book is well researched; the ten pages of footnotes and bibliography set at the end do not inconvenience the learned or distract the casual reader. The extensive use of old photographs lends a special appeal to the publication and gives an affectionate cast to the treatment of the subject.

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Stagecoach East: Stagecoach Days in the East from the Colonial Period to the Civil War. By Oliver W. Holmes and Peter T. Rohrbach. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983. Pp. vii + 200. Cloth. \$17.50.)

Stagecoaches began as mail and newspaper carriers and only later developed passenger service. For the developing American colonies stagecoaches were a vital means of communication. Later they served the nation as the most commonly used form of transportation after the chaise. This book tells the story of the eastern stagecoach system and explains its significance.

During these antebellum years travel in the United States, particularly for long distances, was not an easy undertaking. The stagecoach in its early days appeared to be nothing short of an instrument of torture. The coach, a long vehicle with several seats, was not designed for ease of entry. Passengers in the back were "obliged to crawl across all the other benches to get to their places." There were no backs to these benches, and only canvas or leather sides (which could be rolled up or down) protected passengers from inclement weather. Little space was allotted for luggage. Combined with the dismal condition of most roads, stagecoach travel required an iron constitution, especially when life and limb could be threatened further by frightened horses or armed robbers.

However, stagecoach routes, except during the American Revolution, expanded continuously until the Civil War. Even with the advent of the railroad in the 1840s, the stagecoach continued as the major source of land transportation. In Maine this development began with the first stage route to Portland from Boston, established in 1795. This route was extended to Augusta in 1806, to Bath and Wiscasset in 1810, and later to Belfast and Bangor. By 1819 one could travel from Anson, Maine, via Washington, D.C., to Nashville, Tennessee, by stage, a distance of 1,448 miles. Maine was home to two stage companies (each owning over two hundred horses). The Portland Stage Company, founded in 1824, served the older southern settlements, and the Maine Stage Company, established in 1823, tended to accommodate those areas north of Portland. The period 1824-1845 is generally considered the heyday of staging in Maine. Only after 1845 were stages forced to cooperate with the railroad in order to gain business and maintain prosperity.

Of cardinal importance in stage transportation was the development of the Concord Coach, which made its first appearance in 1827 from a factory in Concord, New Hampshire. With its body usually painted red and the coach straw color, it became the standard of comfort and excellence for the remainder of the stagecoach era in the East and was adopted by

Wells Fargo for the West. Today, thanks to the movie industry, it remains for many Americans a romantic symbol of the "Wild West," despite its eastern origins.

Along with their chronicle of stagecoach development, Holmes and Rohrbach include many useful sections on the men who drove the coaches and the taverns that served the passengers. Based largely on numerous primary sources, *Stagecoach East* is a significant book, covering a topic that previously had not been subject to comprehensive analysis. There are flaws. The book suffers from a lack of good maps to illustrate the various routes so meticulously described in the text, and there is no list of illustrations in the front of the book. These shortcomings aside, *Stagecoach East* can be considered the most authoritative, reliable, and complete history on the subject yet available. This is unlikely to change for some time.

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Coastal New England. By William F. Robinson. (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1983. Pp. 222. Cloth. \$35.00.)

The top of my table is spread with three books, all dealing with the coast. One is Charles B. McLane's *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast* (1982), which deals with a limited area of the Maine coast. It is both scholarly and entertaining. Already the book jacket of my copy is torn; the binding is loose. It is the most frequently read book in my home, and the one most often borrowed. The second, Bill Harris's *The New England Coast* (1985), has seven pages of text that end with Thoreau's comment about Cape Cod: "A man may stand there and put all America behind him." Harris's color photographs of New England's coast begin with a picture of the Quoddy Head Lighthouse and end with a picture of Long Island Sound viewed from the Connecticut Rocky Neck State Park. Its 133 pictures, chiefly of Maine and Massachusetts, are beautiful. As

a lover of winter, though, I wish there were more pictures of ice-sealed harbors and snowswept shores.

The third book is William F. Robinson's *Coastal New England: Its Life and Past*. Its pages are graced by the author's colorful photographs; reproductions of newspaper, magazine, and timetable pictures; and copies of paintings. I rejoice that Eastman Johnson's *The Cranberry Pickers* is one of the paintings reproduced. The book has a site-list of towns from south to north, chapter notes (given at the end of the book), and an impressive bibliography. Robinson took care to credit the sources of his illustrations. The index is not without errors; references to information about Bar Harbor on page 169 are incorrect, for example.

During the summer, I loaned Mr. Robinson's book to three friends. Each returned the book with a card of comment. My friend the librarian wrote, "This book should be in every library. It both instructs and entertains." My friend who is an expert on sailing and shipbuilding complemented Robinson on his mastery of sea terms and his skill as a photographer. He regretted that Robinson did not give more attention to the big American frigates of the War of 1812, the Gloucester fishing fleet, and the Maine coasters. My third friend, a retired English teacher, noted (as did my second friend) that the text is too often interrupted by quoted passages in italics. The two of them agreed on the fine quality of the book, however. I quote the English teacher: "This is a book to pick up and savor for a while, put down, and return to often. It is less a narrative and more a splendid coffee-table book for sampling, here and there, now and then."

My friends and I were not pleased with Mr. Robinson's characterization of our town. Blue Hill is hardly an "artists' and artisans' colony." It is indeed a summer colony and has been since the 1890s, but thanks to Kneisel Hall, musicians outnumber artisans. Information on other towns in the site-list is likely more accurate.

The introduction to Mr. Robinson's book is worth consideration. It begins with a quotation from Melville's *Moby Dick*:

“Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged into his deepest reveries — stand that man on his own legs, set his feet agoing and he will infallibly lead you to water.” Mr. Robinson’s book does indeed lead the reader’s feet to water, and it sets him to thinking about salt-water farms and deep-harbor ports, fishing fleets, and laden merchantmen, schooners, and ships. He wrote that he aimed to give a “comprehensive feeling for the New England coast itself, and how it has shaped the lives of those who dwelt along its shores.” The primary intent of the book is to give a vivid picture of the diversity of the people and places of coastal New England.

I believe that the book fulfills this purpose. I fault him on two points only. He might well have given greater stress to coastal residents as weather watchers, men and women who read the signs of changing weather in the sea, the sky, the wind, and the quality of the air. I regret secondly that there is no mention of how sea language came ashore. Even today, coastal New Englanders use sea terms, often unawares. Skylark, scud, mares’ tails, loadstar, gam, a Jonah, coals to Newcastle, chock-ablock, caboose, bunk, and aback are only a few of the seaborne expressions now part of coastal language. Information on this fascinating topic is readily available from several sources, including *Sea Language Comes Ashore*, by Joanna Colcord (1945); *Coast of New England*, by Robert Carter (1864; reprint by New Hampshire Publishing Company, 1969); and the stories and novels of George Wasson.

Robinson’s *Coastal New England* has 27 maps, 39 line drawings, and 100 black-and-white and 20 color illustrations. More importantly, it has a text that ably presents the facts and the flavor of New England’s maritime past.

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