
BOOK REVIEWS

A Maine Hamlet. By Lura Beam. (Augusta: Lance Tapley, 1957, 1985. Pp. 236. \$8.95.)

One of Maine's best rural histories has been republished. Lura Beam's *A Maine Hamlet* is a semiautobiographical account of a turn-of-the-century village in Maine's Washington County. First published in 1957, it is now available in paperback from Lance Tapley for \$8.95.

Beam grew up in Marshfield, not far from Machias. She eventually "Went Away," to school at Barnard College and the University of California at Berkeley, and then to work as a teacher and social worker in the South. In 1953, she returned to her birthplace, grew reacquainted with the land and the people, and was inspired to write about it.

The world of *A Maine Hamlet* is the world of Beam's grandparents — Marshfield and Machias between 1894 and 1904. It is a manifestly personal account, yet it is told with a social worker's eye for human detail. Beam describes Marshfield in terms of its people and their interactions with their social institutions: family, place, religion, work, school, and belief. As such, she draws a clear picture of individuals grounded in a community, where the right to be one's self was balanced with obligations to family and neighbors. Not just the hardness of life, but a "continuity of customs" demanded adherence to a code of hard work, thrift, self control, honesty, and marriage.

Beam begins her description of a rural community with the family. She chooses her grandparents as her model married couple, and uses the model to exhibit both the ideas of the permanence of love and marriage and of division of labor according to sex roles — ideas which she argues formed the cornerstones of the farm family. From a description of "men's work" in the fields and woods, Beam glides to a thoughtful essay on people's relationships with the land. Knowledge of their environment was detailed, and nature was personified to the extent that even the rocks in the fields had names. The work for both sexes was hard. Beam presents a detailed picture of the

household chores that were the province of women and the plowing, millwrighting, and “working in the woods” that awaited men. In old age, both were bent and worn. She tells of the vicissitudes in the Maine economy that drove the men from one occupation to another. When the price of farm goods fell after the Civil War, men went into the woods; when all the good timber around Marshfield had been cut, they went to work at the sawmill in Machias; when the sawmill closed, the men returned to their fields or moved on to other places.

Beam describes other social institutions as well. Through a child’s eyes, the reader is taken to a one-room school house. Although too poor to keep its Congregationalist meeting house opened year round, the people of Marshfield still found religion important. Sermons were clipped from newspapers and widely discussed. Children were sent to Sunday school and later quizzed by parents. Bibles were prominent in each home.

Indeed, faced with economic hardship and a declining population, the hamlet drew all the more tightly into itself and its institutions. Strongly held community mores dictated individual behavior, and the most notorious transgressors were ostracized. Still in all, Beam’s farmers showed some tolerance. The handicapped and elderly were taken care of, and, provided they remained quiet, even such “queer people” as dreamers, lazy folks, divorced couples, Xanthippes and Democrates were accepted, although the latter grudgingly.

It is difficult to find fault with Beam. Her account is more personal than scholarly, although that is sometimes its advantage — it breathes with an intensity that makes its people convincing, and it is always honest. Beam has maddeningly preserved the anonymity of her characters by changing names and combining and recombining real people into hypothetical constructs, but this does not make her observations less valid. *A Maine Hamlet* is a believable description of society and life in a turn-of-the-century rural Maine place, and is of value to both the historian and the casual reader.

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New Hampshire: Crosscurrents in Its Development. By Nancy Coffey Heffernan and Ann Page Stecker. (Grantham, N.H.: Thompson & Rutter, Inc., 1986. Pp. 216. Paper. \$12.50.)

This is the best conveniently available survey of the history of New Hampshire now in print. Which is to say that it is an improvement over its only real rival, Elting and Elizabeth Morison's *New Hampshire: A Bicentennial History*, published in "The States and the Nation" series a decade ago. The two books are closely comparable in length, scope, and price, but Heffernan-Stecker does the job with more detail and greater authority. *Crosscurrents* perhaps doesn't stand up quite as well when set beside Ronald and Grace Jager's lavishly illustrated and very skillfully written *New Hampshire: An Illustrated History of the Granite State* (1983), but these two volumes are not really comparable. The Jagers' fine prose is encased in a handsome and expensive volume of "subscription history" designed more for the coffee table than for the study, the classroom, or the weekend traveling bag, where the two smaller books could easily find a home.

The great strength of the new book is its grounding in virtually all the relevant scholarship of the past twenty years. The two authors are not themselves historical scholars in the usual sense (both began as English teachers), but they have achieved superb command of the surprisingly substantial body of secondary literature by various scholarly specialists, journalists, and other writers who in one way or another in recent years have been illuminating aspects of the New Hampshire past and concepts related to it. Their utter reliance on this literature does result in some unevenness of coverage, yielding the expected bias in favor of the period from settlement to roughly the Civil War, since it is there that the existing work is the strongest.

The authors carry their theme of "crosscurrents" more or less coherently throughout the book, though it becomes most explicit and perhaps most workable toward the end, where they lay out with some effectiveness the clashing contemporary concerns of economic development, startling population

growth, environmental awareness, conservative politics, and home rule.

Crosscurrents deals largely in political and economic matters rather than either the societal structures and processes of the “new” social history or any of the concerns of the cultural historian. There is scant attention to women, the family, racial and ethnic minorities, or similar fashionable topics, and virtually none to literature, education (except in a full-blown discussion of the famous Dartmouth College case), or the arts.

Heffernan and Stecker have, however, produced a readable, coherent summary of what the general reader needs most to know about the special case of New Hampshire from its settlement by Europeans to the present decade. Unless something better comes along in the meantime, which is doubtful, I shall probably assign it as the basic text next time I teach the occasionally offered undergraduate survey of the history of New Hampshire.

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