
BOOK REVIEWS

Hidden Places: Maine Writers on Coastal Villages, Mill Towns, and the North Country. By Joseph Conforti. (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 2020. Pp. 264, Paper, \$38.00)

Joseph Conforti brings literary analysis together with regional landscape studies to explore what he calls the “shared public space” of Maine’s diverse geographical settings. Conforti argues that novelists from across the state “provoke readers to see and understand seemingly familiar places with a new awareness”(xii). His deep appreciation for Maine, its “rocky coastline [and] rugged mountains,” as well as its blue-collar laborers and far-flung communities, runs through the entirety of this work. He asserts that there can be no one great Maine novel due to the diversity of the state.

Conforti divides this book into three sections, coastal, backwoods, and mill town communities. In each, he turns to writers that made Maine a central part of their work. Each description of an author follows the same narrative arc. Conforti gives a brief biography that centers on an author’s relationship to Maine. He then provides a detailed synopsis of one or several books, followed by the literary response to the author and their work. He thus offers a sampler of Maine’s literary canon.

In “Coasts and Islands,” Conforti introduces readers to Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Ellen Chase, and Ruth Moore. All were born and grew up in Maine, although none remained in the state as adults. While he makes little of this, their combined cosmopolitanism shines through their biographies. All three entered into lifelong, same-sex partnerships, traveled the world, and lived in urban centers. In these chapters, Conforti explains the effect that a faltering maritime economy, accompanied by the rise of factory labor and summer tourism, had on Maine’s coastal residents.

In “The North Country and Backcountry,” Conforti describes the work of Ben Ames Williams, Elizabeth Coatsworth, Cathie Pelletier, and Carolyn Chute. In these chapters, the reader receives a sense of the isolation of the Maine woods and, in the work of Coatsworth,

the only mention of the Wabanaki peoples of Maine. Economic collapse fills the works of Chute and Pelletier, who describe Maine's back-country as New England Appalachia.

In the last section, "Mill City and Mill Town," Conforti turns to the landscape of declining industrial Maine in the works of Gerard Robichaud, Elizabeth Strout, Richard Russo, and Monica Wood. His chapter on ethnicity in Lewiston (through Robichaud and Strout) is particularly strong, especially as he brings attention to people beyond white Yankees through Gerard Robichaud's novel on Franco-American life and Strout's literary account of Somali immigrants. Conforti's analyses of economic and social change represent the strongest parts of his writing. He is most comfortable in class and labor analysis, seeing most of the novels through this lens.

While Conforti discusses gender, he does not provide an adequate analysis of it. He suggests that women may be more grounded in place, yet this ignores the cosmopolitan lives of most of these authors and that they often described the incredible isolation, violence, and oppression women faced in economically strapped Maine towns. Strong women do appear in these works, but the near continuous depictions of women's laborious births, sexual violence, and economic subordination to men all indicate that much more needs to be discussed. Conforti also misses the opportunity to grapple with masculinity in these works. The shifting ground of masculinity in Maine wrought by changing economies comes through prominently in these novels, which could lend insight to Maine culture. This book provides not only an expansive look at Maine communities through literary analysis, but also suggests questions for further study.

Emma Schroeder
University of Maine

Midcoast Maine in World War II. By Margaret Shiels Konitzky. (Charleston SC: The History Press, 2018. Pp. 224, Paper. \$21.99)

Countless Mainers and Maine history enthusiasts are familiar with the role Bath Iron Works played during War World II. Unfortunately, efforts and impacts of the surrounding Midcoast region of Maine are not often fully understood. However, Margaret Shiels Konitzky in her book, *Midcoast Maine in World War II*, gives a detailed summation of life on the home front and the roles played by hundreds of locals. Not only does she explain the general war support movements and reactions of different towns along the midcoast, but she illustrates the unique roles played by specific people. She details the names of hundreds and the part they played in helping the war effort.

Her book also makes a point to explain the important responsibilities taken on by women. It is pointed out that women worked in factories, cared for military members that were stationed locally, took part in watching the coastline for enemy planes or submarines and took on other roles as well. Throughout her book, Konitzky explains parts of life on the home front and then includes how they might have affected women differently. She also strives to tell the stories of women who went above and beyond; women who managed a full-time job, childcare, and volunteering efforts. Her book supplies a medium for these stories to be heard and not forgotten as traces of their lives fade with time.

While this book demonstrates the strong, hardworking role many Mainer's played during the war, it also explains the hardships they faced. As the war went on several daily items were strictly rationed making it difficult to prepare meals with proper nutrients, travel with limitations on gas or have any large gatherings for special occasions. Konitzky explains this difficult time and the confusion many people felt by revealing both the struggles and the unique ways people learned to adapt. She goes into detail about victory gardens, the expansion of

public transport, and collection drives to gather materials for the war.

Another unique feature of her book is her focus on shipyards. While Bath Iron Works made a massive contribution to the war effort, Konitzky uses her book to tell the stories of other, smaller shipyards that did their part. There were dozens of small shipyards along the coast that were used to build minesweepers and small watercraft needed for the war. These shipyards were able to employ locals, provide income to the economy, and give aid to the war effort. While they were not building a new destroyer every 17 days as BIW did for part of the war, it is clear these smaller shipyards were still vital to the war and the local economy.

Konitzky's book sheds light on a part of Maine history that is not always understood properly. However, it is not without flaws. There are several sections that list specific people, their family members, and their roles which are difficult to comprehend and the sentences seem a bit disconnected taking away from the quality of the stories. However, when discussing so many unique characters in this historic illustration there may not be an alternative. With that being said, this book is an excellent read. It includes excitement, humor, pride and so much more. It constructs a detailed understanding of midcoast Maine during World War II and tells the stories of residents who played crucial roles during the war, many of whom would be forgotten without the valuable work of Konitzky.

Jennifer Munson
University of Maine

Rediscovering the Maine Woods: Thoreau's Legacy in an Unsettled Land. Edited by John J. Kucich. (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019. Pp. 227. Paper. \$27.95)

Rediscovering the Maine Woods consists of nine of essays designed to encourage the reader to rediscover the woods of Maine that Henry David Thoreau wrote about and loved. Divided evenly

between personal reflective essays, literary criticism, and history, these essays cover a diverse array of angles from which to consider the legacy of Thoreau and his book *The Maine Woods*. Some are personal essays written from a variety of perspectives (Penobscot Indians, literature, and history). Penobscot writers Chris Sockalexis and James Francis express how participation in the Thoreau-Wabanaki Anniversary Tour gave them a "truer Penobscot sense of place" connecting them to nature, their ancestors, and their history. Francis describes his participation in the portages of the river journey as a time for "stories, connections, and reflections" that acted "as a threshold, allowing our senses to connect one space with another, one time with another, and individuals with their ancestors and ancestral territory." Likewise John J. Kucich and Stan Tag meditate on the ways that their participation enhanced their appreciation of Thoreau, his ideas about wilderness, and the Maine woods.

Some of the scholarly essays focus on the sense of place the Maine woods provided Thoreau and the ways that the material world shaped his perception of and relationship with Nature. Robert M. Thorson offers a geological description of the region and analyzes the accuracy of Thoreau's understanding of the geological data. Laura Dassow Walls considers the influence of the material world on Thoreau contending that his "three excursions to Maine inscribe a process of interior growth and discovery that comes to encompass the planet itself." The confusion engendered by Thoreau's initial visit and failed attempt to summit Mount Katahdin and his subsequent return trips to the woods for answers to that shattering experience parallel the modern struggle for meaning and certainty in a life full of contradictions and paradoxes. Walls renders a startling conclusion that Thoreau found the solution to the terror of uncertainty not by looking heavenward, but by turning earthward to the planet itself for solace and comfort. Perhaps she is right to remind her readers of the ways that the materiality of nature shape us, but it is certainly difficult to reconsider one of the pre-eminent Transcendentalists shorn of the Transcendent in his pursuit of answers to

the unanswerable questions of life. In a similar manner, Melissa Sexton, in her theoretical analysis of Thoreau's experience at "Ktaadn, attempts to show that "transformative power" of the material world shapes humans as much if not more than humans shaping the material world". Finally, Kathryn Cornell Dolan draws our attention to the role that local cuisine played in his travels in general and in his Maine woods adventures in particular. Dolan combs *The Maine Woods* for references to food showing Thoreau a connoisseur of both the food of Maine and the variety of ways that it is prepared. This is certainly an interesting and overlooked aspect of Thoreau who once said he was almost overwhelmed with a desire to capture a woodchuck and devour it raw.

Historians of Maine history will find the most value in the final section of the book which considers the legacy of Thoreau's vision of the working forest and his wilderness ideas. James S. Finley offers a revisionist reading of *The Maine Woods* correcting the fallacy of the Maine woods as pristine and untouched by man. Rather, it was a working forest where hunters and travelers had access to the woods alongside loggers and lumber barons. Nor did Thoreau see it this way. The Maine woods was a commons where human and nonhuman, naturalist and logger, all lived in a sustainable environment and Thoreau's concern was that the commons must never be enclosed by practice or preservation. Thoreau's vision for the Maine woods is extended by Dale Potts as he traces the gradual shift in thinking from mixed use working forests of Thoreau's day to preservation in the twentieth century. Based on the publications of environmental advocates such as Martin Avery, William O. Douglas, Helen Hamlin, and Bill Geagan, Potts shows how the working forest concept may have worked well in Thoreau's day, but was gradually undermined by clear-cutting, excessive hunting and fishing, and pollution (by both tourists and the timber industry). Richard W. Judd is not as quick to jettison Thoreau's pragmatic compromise. In his essay, he outlines the nation's struggle to find "a proper relation to the natural world" tracing the development of the wilderness movement from its nascent

emphasis on ecology in the 1940s and 1950s to the environmental protection and wilderness preservation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Judd notes the ways that Thoreau's writings were used by the various groups in support of their legislative agenda and their wilderness ideology. Returning to Thoreau's work, Judd asserts that Thoreau's main contribution to our understanding of the wilderness is his belief that we would appreciate nature, both near and far, if we would just live life deliberately spending time in the natural world most near to us. In this way Thoreau closes "the gap between the wilderness sublime and the domestic landscape."

This book offers new insight into the legacy of Thoreau and his classic book *The Maine Woods* demonstrating his enduring impact on Maine and its ongoing dialogue over the proper use of its natural resources.

David Raymond
Northern Maine Community College

Lives of Consequence: Blacks in Early Kittery & Berwick in the Massachusetts Province of Maine. By Patricia Q. Wall (Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Portsmouth Marine Society for the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire and the Portsmouth Historical Society, 2017. Pp.229. Paper. \$20.00)

Lives of Consequence is an eye-opening history of Maine's first black community, located in Early Kittery and Berwick in the mid-1600s – 1820. In today's realities it might be titled "Black Lives Who Mattered."

Patricia Q. Wall makes the black people of the time come alive through a narrative based on copious research about nearly 500 people. Enslaved Africans were first brought to Maine in 1663 to build a colony of several rural settlements along the Piscataqua River across from Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Wall describes her goal: "To push aside the barrier word 'slave' to try to see the men, women, and children to whom that inhuman la-

bel applied.” She calls it “tattered and wanting history.”

In order to get to the “lives of consequence” she describes the dehumanization of black people in Early Kittery and Berwick, communities that now include Eliot, Berwick and South Berwick. There were 200 white slaveholders, whose slaves relieved them of daily work so they could become entrepreneurs and “improve their status and future of their descendants.” The sawmills’ products and dried fish were shipped to the Caribbean and the ships brought back molasses and Africans, who became permanently both in exile and deprived of their native cultures and languages.

The difficult process of finding black lives, in fact, gave Wall her story. Whites named blacks with a single derisive or mocking name and often the same name was used for many. One-third of the black people in the area were nameless. There was sparse documentation. Census takers counted only able-bodied men, ages 16 to 45. This practice added to the myth that there was no or very little slavery in Maine. Ira Berlin differentiated between slave societies in the South and enslaved individuals in the North.¹ Yet, slaves in both locations advanced white people’s economic development. Wall documents that Kittery and Berwick’s black individuals might not be corporate slaves but were “owned” or “used” for the same purposes

Wall writes, “Still, it is that ‘almost nothing’ in the records, those intriguing small mentions, scattered bits upon bare bones, that when set within the larger framework of daily life and events, bring the past alive, bring us closer to an important group of Kittery people so long ignored.”

Wall, already a skilled author of two historical novels about a black child in New England, takes the reader to the times. She sets the background, history and circumstances in an interesting narrative filled with individual stories.

Rachel was beaten to death in 1694 by white Nathaniel Keen. In 1695 Keen was tried and convicted for “cruelty to his Negro woman by cruel beating and hard usage” and fined five pounds.

William Black (aka “Black Will”) is de-

scribed by Wall as the best known black person in Maine’s early history. Black was very likely Maine’s first black landowner, and was leader of this early black community.

Pompey who ran away twice was found because of an advertisement in July 1750 for his return to his master with a reward of ten pounds. The ad reads: “he had on a pair of Pot-hooks and ‘has one of his ears cut’.” Pictured are the notice and an illustration of a man in Pot-hooks which was “a painful iron slave’s collar.”

Toney literally murdered his way out of slavery and the repeated beatings he endured. In July 1755 he killed the daughter of his master, turned himself in, and confessed to the sheriff in nearby York. Toney was hung in York Village in 1756.

Sarah (1720–1793) was a maidservant to Mrs. Samuel Lorder, who willed Sarah three kitchen chairs, a pine chest, a small iron pot and kettle, one bed, beddings and clothing. Wall’s research fills out Sarah’s hard life and losses from various sources.

Molly Miles (1719–1827) who would have been completely forgotten is known because of a message written on the underside of a table: “This table came from Sir William Pepperell. He gave it to his slave Molly Miles.”

The reality of, and even visible black presence in Maine has been challenged for so many generations that the myth of “white Maine” is now stamped on the national consciousness. *Lives of Consequence* refutes that with extensive data on blacks, mulattoes, and Indians in Berwick and Kittery. This work, for which Wall received a 2018 Maine Historical Society John W. Allen, Jr. Maine History Award, makes a very important contribution to the new canon of black history in Maine.

H. H. Price
Back Cove, Portland

1. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1998, Prologue