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A BOOK FOR LOVERS OF OLD-TIME THINGS

Reviewed by HERBERT ROSS BROWN

*Bowdoin College*

GENERATIONS of Colby men and women do not need to be reminded, least of all by an outsider, that — among many other blessings—they possess in Ernest Marriner a remarkable Dean. Since 1948, every Sunday evening, his laconic and sinewy Yankee speech, aided and abetted by WTVL's kilocycles, has been delighting a larger audience than that of the charmed circle on Mayflower Hill. And now in his latest book,\* *Kennebec Yesterdays*, the Dean is out for even bigger game. He has pushed back the walls of his expanding classroom to write for lovers of old-time things and old-time ways far beyond the reaches of Kennebec Valley. In his infinite pawkiness, the Dean knows the shortest cut to universality is an intense and loving localism.

*Kennebec Yesterdays* shares at least one quality with Central Maine—it has everything, including the kitchen sink. Its pages are crammed with the very flesh-and-blood stuff of social history: the far-off but happily remembered things, the ordinary concerns of ordinary people. Some of his artifacts were salvaged from hundreds of dusty attics where faded letters, diaries, and account-books yielded up their treasures; others came from the lips of elderly people like that ninety-year old veteran saboteur in the bloodless Aroostook War. One does not read far into this book without sensing that the author is an easy man for common folks to talk to. And the Dean (this will not be fresh news to Colby undergraduates) has more than even a decanal memory for details. Many of the best things in *Kennebec Yesterdays* come from his own recollections which not only “go back quite a piece,” but are as broad as they are long. More-

\* *Kennebec Yesterdays*. By Ernest Marriner. Colby College Monograph No. 21. Waterville: The Colby College Press. Pp. 320. Illus. 11. 1954. \$3.75.

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over, as a student of American speech, Dean Marriner knows how to communicate the flat vowels and unsounded consonants of Maine's vernacular. His book will talk its way into many hearts.

The author sticks pretty closely to the Kennebec Valley. He'll have no truck with the quaint notion sometimes cherished by misguided people all the way from Bowdoinham to Skowhegan Falls that *their* river is *the* Kennebec. No siree. The Androscoggin (a sadly polluted stream) flows into the Kennebec. And make no mistake, "Colby is the Kennebec's only college" (Brunswick newspapers and Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, please take notice!). Yet Dean Marriner can't resist a good thing even when it is out of bounds. He has an amiable weakness for his native Bridgton which has the misfortune to lie a hundred miles from the Kennebec. But what's a mere hundred miles when, for sixteen of them, you could ride the Bridgton and Saco River Railway. The Dean nowhere writes more caressingly than when he is describing the narrow-gauge lines, "the little wigglers" which, on occasion, might stop just long enough to enable passengers to gather wild-flowers along the right-of-way. Bridgton's general stores also evoke his gently elegiac moods, especially the country store owned by the author's father in which his son clerked in a dusky atmosphere redolent of everything from allspice and arnica to woodenware, wicks, and yeast. One must not think, however, that *Kennebec Yesterdays* is an orgy of sticky sentiment and trumped-up nostalgia. The Dean is too canny a codger to fall into *that* sand-trap. He is not a member of the fashionable cult of the let-us-praise-every-nook-and-cranny enthusiasts. Candor compels him to concede that the good old days were not always good. He even chronicles the grisly fact that the founder of the great A & P chain, the grandfather of all super-markets, was born in Augusta, smack on the Kennebec. Being a Yankee, Mr. Marriner knows how to take the bad along with the good. That

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there's likely to be an ounce of sour in every pound of sweet is an indispensable element in his Kennebec heritage.

Where so much is served up with such engaging gusto, it is difficult for a reviewer to pick and choose. Patrons of the Marriner store must also have had moments of agonizing hesitation amid the cracker-boxes and crockery. There's God's plenty in *Kennebec Yesterdays*. The author has a Dickensian affection for the names of places and people. He lingers over them lovingly, counting his bead-roll of juicy scamps like Dr. Valorus P. Coolidge, intrepid travellers with "itching feet" like Hezekiah Prince, and homespun editors like Marcellus Cain. He glories in place-names: Monotony School District, Hogtown, and Pondicherry. He savors the titles of newspapers like those of the *Skowhegan Clarion*, the Waterville *Sharpshooter*, the *China Orb*, and the sesquipedalian but short-lived *Watervillonian*.

There's information aplenty, too. *Kennebec Valley 1-2* ought to be a required course for summer visitors who point their shiny new beachwagons toward Vacationland. It would teach them why natives always say "down in Maine" (see pages 57 and 63); it will explain why travelling salesmen came to be known as "runners" instead of "drummers" (look up page 108); it will settle once and for all the vexed question why the old-timers built covered bridges (the answer is to be found on pages 61-62); it accounts for the latter-day miracle of a Baptist college being saved by a Universalist (don't miss page 218). Dean Marriner likes to dispel myths as well as to chronicle them. There's that heresy, for example, about pie for breakfast. And our author believes moderation in all things is the predominant Kennebec trait. He simply refuses to believe that *any* steamboat, even on his beloved Kennebec, ever sailed up into a Sidney field on an early morning dew.

Being a reasonable son of Our Lady Kennebec, the author will want to know what at least one reader looked for and did *not* find. To say the truth: not much. He should

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have welcomed, however, some account of Kennebec tastes in popular fiction. Did ordinary folks devour *The Gun-Maker of Moscow* and other lurid thrillers in the story-paper weeklies of the 1870's and 1880's? Sylvanus Cobb, Jr., the author of scores of these melodramatic tales, was born in Waterville. And what about that pioneer female novelist, "Madam" Sally Wood, author of *Julia and the Illuminated Baron*, a handkerchiefly novel which raised goose-pimples and drew enough tears to turn the Kennebec to salt. And from Wiscasset, too! What about the popular drama? Did Christy's Ethiopian Minstrel Troupe never find its way into the Kennebec Valley? Were there no productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Were there no tears shed over little Eva's translation to heaven? Did no one make invidious comparisons between the pure ice of the Kennebec and the inferior imported article over which Eliza escaped? But these are picayune matters, lugged in merely to maintain my status as an objective critic. Doubtless, a regular listener to WTVL's popular broadcasts, "Little Talks on Common Things," has heard about these items, and many others.

Dean Marriner, like all great teachers, knows that overtones are often more significant than facts. And his book has caught all the nuances which emanate from the glory of the commonplace. The eloquent last chapter, "Kennebec Heritage," is a testament of sanity in the air-conditioned and Neon-lit nightmare of contemporary life. To one who was born in the outer darkness on the other side of the Connecticut line, to one who is not New-England born, alas, not even Boston-plated, to one who resides on the lower Androscoggin—*Kennebec Yesterdays* is both an orientation and an initiation. Of course, it can't make a Yankee of him, you've got to be born to such a heritage; it won't quite admit him into the Kennebec Valley. But it will help. In a word, this book is a *hum-dinger*. And for that matter, so is Dean Ernest Marriner, L.H.D.



DEAN ERNEST C. MARRINER

*Author of Kennebec Yesterdays*

