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## Colby Library Quarterly

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### A "MAINE-IAC" IN SEARCH OF TRADITION

By ROBERT MERIDETH

*He who finds will  
to come home  
will surely find old faith  
made new again  
and lavish welcome.*

—MARSDEN HARTLEY, "Return  
of the Native" (1940).

MARSDEN HARTLEY was born and grew up in Lewiston, Maine; his early and middle years as an artist were spent trying to escape his heritage. He was trying to exist "without prescribed culture," to survive, as he put it in a 1913 letter to Gertrude Stein, the "fatal" factors of heredity and environment. He felt in 1913 that he had "mastered" his heritage by ignoring it, that he had thus become "utterly free," his "own being"; like nature, he thought, he defined himself "in all ways." But if, as we must, we take as the test his poetry and painting, Hartley became a significant artist only by returning home, by accepting his culture. Before he became a "Maine-iac" in 1936, declaring himself "the painter from Maine" and celebrating the "quality of nativeness," he was eclectic and experimental. Afterwards, as Elizabeth McCausland and Duncan Phillips have said of his painting, and Robert Burlingame of his poetry, he became indigenous and successful. Maine provided the catalyst he had been all the time seeking elsewhere.

The question that Hartley's career poses has not been resolved. What was it that Maine specifically — and New England more generally — gave him? Burlingame has cited his letter to Mrs. Charles P. Kuntz (July 1933), in which three years before his 'declaration' he admits that he had "only gone the other way around," by way of Europe, "to get home." The "voices of Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson," he said, "belong to my space, my innate areas." This, according to Burlingame, we are to understand as an acknowledgment of "poetic influence" ("Marsden Hartley's *Androscoggin*: Return to Place," *New England Quarterly*, XXXI [December 1958], 447). But was it not Hartley's acknowledgment of more than that? It

could not have been primarily to Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson as poets he was pointing, though that may be part of it; the first two are not primarily poets at all. It was, I think, rather their importance as carriers of a cultural tradition that he had in mind.

That, at least, was his criterion in judging American painters. In his provocative essay on "American Values in Painting," he praised those whose "value" was "as indigenous creators," those who, in working out their "artistic destinies on home soil," helped establish "a native tradition." In another essay he celebrated Albert P. Ryder, undoubtedly for him the major painter in a tradition to which Hartley himself would eventually assent. His response to his first Ryder painting is revealing. The picture itself was only a "marine . . . just some sea, some clouds, and a sail boat on the tossing waters." He knew "little or nothing" about Ryder then, he tells us, but when he learned Ryder was from New England, "the same feeling came over" him "in the given degree" as came from first reading Emerson's *Essays*; he felt as if he had read a "page of the Bible." All his "essential Yankee qualities were brought forth," and he felt he had been "thrown back into the body and being" of his own "country as by no other influence that had come" to him. Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Ryder: these became Hartley's Bible. They came to signify, not the "jaded tradition" he had tried to escape as a young man, but the viable, indigenous tradition he needed and had sought as an artist.

In his later years, he went so far as to try to translate New England words onto his canvas. His numerous paintings of Mt. "Katahdin" are, in fact, attempts to paint what Henry Thoreau wrote in "Ktaadn," the first essay in the posthumously published *The Maine Woods*. The essay is an account of Thoreau's trip in the summer of 1846 from Concord, Mass., to Bangor, Maine, and of his subsequent excursion to Mt. Ktaadn and its environs. Hartley must surely have read and reread Thoreau's response to one perspective on the mountain, for to read Thoreau's description is to verbalize Hartley's paintings. Near the end of their descent from the mountain Thoreau and his companions "described" a "little meadow and pond," where they found fresh tracks of moose. "It was a small meadow," Thoreau wrote, "of a few acres, on the mountain side, con-

cealed by the forest, and perhaps never seen by a white man before, where one would think that the moose might browse and bathe, and rest in peace." Both "secluded meadow" and pond are major parts of Hartley's Ktaadn paintings, all of which include them. Thoreau also provides the language with which Hartley would no doubt like us to describe the quality he captured. The mountain, Thoreau said, was "no man's garden"; it was the "unhandselled globe." It was neither "lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor wasteland." It was, rather, the pure and "fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth," as if like Eden it exists forever in the mind of God, as if it were "a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world."

Hartley, then, as one could show many times over, not only sought an indigenous tradition verbally, but found one in practice. It is this sense of identification, not only with Maine as a place, but with Maine as part of a cultural tradition, a heritage of values and perceptions, that made him successful in his later years. As he wrote of Winslow Homer, he had "the quality of Thoreau"; unlike Homer, he had also "the genius of Thoreau for the poetry of things." He became the free spirit he wanted to become as a young man by the paradoxical act of accepting the values of his heredity and environment. If he had not, American scholars would be obliged to invent him.



## T. W. HIGGINSON ON THOREAU AND MAINE

By DONALD H. WILLIAMS

AN interesting association between Henry David Thoreau and the State of Maine is discovered in an evidently unpublished letter written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, historian of Maine woods and chronicler of the famous West Branch drive. Mary Higginson's edition of his *Letters and Journals* (Boston, 1921) stops short two years before the date of this autograph letter, which was among some papers given to me by Mrs. Eckstorm in the year preceding her death.

In 1908 Mrs. Eckstorm wrote an incisive critique of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, pointing out certain of his weak-