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Roberts's Dissection of Toynbee

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IN American folklore, the Mississippi riverman is described as "half-alligator, half-horse, tipped with snapping turtle." When Kenneth Roberts takes up the defense of his native Maine, he is an adversary of equally awesome proportions. In Don't Say That About Maine (the latest publication of the Colby College Press, 1951), Mr. Roberts takes issue with certain allusions to Maine which are to be found in Arnold Toynbee's A Study of History. If the measure of Mr. Roberts's wrath is indicative, Mr. Toynbee's judgments amount to downright calumny. Toynbee's references are made in the course of developing his "areas of optimum challenge" thesis, which Mr. Roberts summarizes fairly thus:

If I understood the professor—and I did—he was arguing that big business, big men, important movements are restricted to areas that are chilly and rugged, but not too chilly nor too rugged. These areas, to make things easier for those who depend on Professor Toynbee to set them straight on civilization through the ages, the professor slangily calls areas of "optimum challenge"—meaning that the intellects, energies, and business capacities of those permanently residing within those areas are so needled by the climate that they work while others sleep.

Mr. Roberts is a meticulous craftsman, with the highest research standards; he strives, to quote him, "to tell the truth as Tolstoi saw it in War and Peace." Furthermore, he is not a man to take advantage of an opponent, but there
are indications in the text that he has allowed his wrath to “jaundice” his vision, to use his own word. For example, when he writes: “so I got the book” (italics mine), is he not admitting that he was quoting from the Somervall abridgment and not from the original? If such had not been the case, would he have accused Toynbee of ignorance of the existence of Vermont, when the original work bears the following specific footnote: “Vermont, which falls into the same group as New Hampshire sociologically, . . . is an offshoot of New York State and therefore not strictly a part of New England by origin” (Vol. II, p. 294)?

Fortunately, the references to Maine in the full text are brief, and the Somervall abridgment follows them closely. The flesh of Toynbee’s thesis, as applied to Maine, is suggested by these passages: “Maine has always been unimportant, and survives to-day as a kind of museum piece . . .”; “these children of a hard country now eke out a scanty livelihood by serving as ‘guides’ for pleasure-seekers, who come from the North American cities to spend their holidays in this Arcadian state.” When Mr. Roberts, whetting his dissecting knife on the solid stone of Maine history, finishes his task—incidentally, he carries his documentation down to the present—there is little but the bare bones left of Toynbee’s application of the thesis to Maine.

While it may be argued whether Mr. Roberts has wholly discredited Mr. Toynbee’s “optimum challenge” thesis, there is no denying that he has conclusively proved that Toynbee was in serious error in setting the boundary limit of “optimum challenge” at the Massachusetts line. Perhaps the vigor of Mr. Roberts’s attack is the most conclusive evidence on this score.