

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 39
Issue 1 *March*

Article 3

March 2003

Introduction

Wesley McNair

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 39, no.1, March 2003, p. 5-9

This Front Matter is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Introduction

By WESLEY McNAIR

“THE LAND WAS OURS before we were the land’s,” the poet Robert Frost famously wrote in “The Gift Outright.” In that one line he summarized the history of white settlers in America, whose claim to territory has so often been preceded by claims of the imagination, beginning with those early white settlers, the Puritans. Conceiving of New England as a place of the restored church even before they crossed the Atlantic, the Puritans began a process of idealizing the region that has influenced in one way or another all of the scholarly essays in this issue.

It is ironic that as Robert Frost refers in his poem to the imaginative construction of place, he unwittingly suggests his own procedure as a poet. Arriving in New England from California in his early youth, he found the Yankees around him “cold” and “narrow,” and even in his thirties, as he struggled to become a farmer in New Hampshire, he yearned to leave New England and join the literary circles of Boston and New York City. His career as a New England poet only began after he escaped the region, living for two years in England and longing for a place he never quite saw when he was there, a location where he could write poetry “from a farm...and get Yankier & Yankier.” Before Robert Frost made his own claim on the land, then, he had first to imagine it.

As several of the entries in *Locating New England* show, imaginative constructions of New England are amply evident in the literature, art, and craft of the region. David Watters’s essay, “Revising New England: Self-Portraits of a Region,” examines a series of self-portraits from past to present to explain how writers and artists have constructed themselves as New Englanders, creating the region in their image. To establish this tradition of self-inscription, Watters turns to early examples, including the portrait of Captain John Smith, set into a map of New England and accompanied by a verse and essay Smith wrote about the meaning of New England, and John Rogers’s “Exhortation to his Children,” a poem, with illustrative portrait, in which Rogers associates himself with God the Father and the religious mission of New England. These self-inscriptions and others provide an archive that is revised in the later literature of the region, most compellingly in the self-inscriptions of African American writers from Phillis Wheatley to Harriet Wilson, and Native American authors from Tomah Joseph to Louise Erdrich. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Watters argues, the archive of regional myths that had

been developed as a guide for the nation was co-opted by the publishing world of New York City, where works such as Washington Irving's "Ichabod Crane" and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* circumscribed and recast New Englanders in their landscape. Industrialization and immigration further threatened the coherence of the mythology sponsored by the archive. Yet today's New England's writers still manage to find spaces in which to inscribe themselves and the territory around them, as Watters shows in his insightful discussion of John Preston's "Down East" at the essay's conclusion. Should there be any doubt about the significance of the written word in the development of our national mythology both inside and outside of the text, Watters's essay is bound to dispel it.

Like David Watters, Roger Stein is concerned with Puritan tradition in his essay, particularly the typology of Jacob's ladder and its impact on later periods of New England culture. Stein begins the investigation of "Searching for Jacob's Ladder" by citing the biblical source, then concentrates on the sermons of the English theologian Benjamin Keach, in which Jacob with his ladder becomes a type of Christ or "more remotely," in Keach's words, a "Church of Christ" that may help transport the elect to heaven. Keach's typological reading prepares for the Puritan interpretation of a chosen people protected and led by the grace of Christ to their spiritual destiny. Is the Civil War portrait of David G. Farragut, with its background view of what seamen came to call the Jacob's ladder, a way of expressing the subject's heroism as the leader of a chosen people to their spiritual destiny? This is just one of Stein's provocative speculations as he carries his search into the nineteenth century, considering also paintings by Thomas Cole, spirituals and quilts from the antislavery period, and finally, a stereographic image of a tourist attraction in the White Mountains called, of course, "Jacob's Ladder." In addition to discussing the implications of this concluding image in its period, Stein discusses its placement in "Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory," an exhibition he co-curated at the Smithsonian's Museum of American Art in 1999; then he turns to the presentation of "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" by the sculptor Martin Puryear for a last, dramatic example of the impact Jacob's ladder has made on the national imagination. Moving back and forth between the high and the popular cultures, and among the disciplines of literature, art, and philosophy, Roger Stein's exploration of the New England influences of this biblical story and image is genuinely wide-ranging.

Whereas Stein touches on the craft tradition in his references to quilt-making, Thomas Denenberg places handcraftmanship at the center of his essay, "Crafting Community: Learning through Doing in 'Old' New England." In the article he explains how the making of furniture, baskets, textiles, and rugs became popular in the late-nineteenth century as a means of reasserting "Old New England" values in the face of rapid social change. Therefore, the phrase "crafting community" in his title refers not only to the communities that sponsored the renewal of crafts, but to the sense of community those crafts were intended to inspire. Departing from the standard treatment of late-century

craftsmanship in relation to aesthetic styles and the historic role of the Society of Arts and Crafts Boston, Denenburg takes us to Deerfield, Massachusetts, to show how the Deerfield Society of Arts and Crafts presented handcrafted objects such as furniture in “colonial” designs as a kind of “antimodern therapy” for its upper-class membership. The Deerfield Society of Blue and White, founded by Ellen Miller and Margaret Whiting, carried the idealization of Old New England to the next level, manufacturing craft items for consumption in the world outside Deerfield, with its own need for symbols of a simpler life. Denenburg’s next stop is Salem. Transformed by railroads and factories in the late century, this Massachusetts town, led by Caroline Emmerton, also turned to the calming influence of handicrafts. Remaking the House of Seven Gables into a Settlement building, Emmerton provided what Denenburg calls “an invented historical environment for craft revival,” inviting the children of immigrants to learn the old skills of craftsmanship and the wholesome values of American life at the same time. Nor was the late-century craft revival limited to Deerfield and Salem, as Denenburg indicates in his discussion of the hooked rug, made and manufactured throughout northern New England and distributed far and wide; for in the end, the Old New England of Thomas Denenberg’s essay was invented not only for the region, but for a nation that was itself undergoing the anxieties of cultural change.

Apprehension about cultural change also led to the images of the idealized New England Donna Cassidy finds in late-nineteenth century paintings of the Colby collection. According to Cassidy’s essay “Framing Region: The Modernist’s New England,” the American impressionist paintings in the collection, like their counterparts elsewhere, addressed the troubling realities of industrialization, technological advances, and consumerism with portrayals of an “ideal” New England that was “isolated, primitive, pastoral.” In their idealizations of Maine, the realists represented in the collection reveal the impulse of escape from urban life as well, Cassidy explains, though canvases such as George Bellows’s *Hill and Valley, Monhegan Maine*, suggest this impulse also resulted in memorable art. Perhaps the most significant work Maine inspired, however, was produced by the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century who, like their earlier counterparts, valued the state as a retreat. Describing paintings such as *Brilliant Autumn Landscape*, by Marsden Hartley, *Stonington, Maine*, by John Marin, and the “Clam Shell” series of Georgia O’Keeffe, Cassidy reveals how the avant-garde painters presented “the way life should be” in Maine, creating in the process some of the Colby collection’s most important paintings. Nor were edenic landscapes and peaceable communities the only ways these artists chose to celebrate Maine. Modernists like Rockwell Kent also celebrated local natives through his depictions of Monhegan fishermen, and Marguerite Zorach romanticized Mainers with her portraits of sitters both from the coast and inland. So rich is Cassidy’s exploration of the collection’s paintings, going on to feature late-twentieth century landscapes by Neil Welliver and Alex Katz, that her essay cannot be fully summarized here. Suffice it to say that by placing the works she discusses in

the context of the wider world of art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she helps us to understand how New England, and Maine in particular, shaped both the careers of individual artists and the direction of modern art in America. And by explaining the ways in which social and cultural history influenced the paintings of the collection, Cassidy shows us that a mythological understanding of New England is by no means limited to the region's literature and crafts.

As depictions of serene weather helped the painters of the Colby collection to convey their idea of Maine as a world elsewhere, the characterizations of Indian summer served the Brahmin writers in their own imaginative construction of New England. Adam Sweeting asserts in "A Nostalgic Season: Nineteenth-Century New England and the Embrace of Indian Summer" that in the mid-nineteenth century, literary descriptions of the warm interlude that normally follows a killing frost in the region became a widespread "meteorological analogue" for showing "New England at its best." The analogue played a crucial role for individual writers among Boston's Brahmin elite; facing their own mortality and sensing the possible demise that the social changes they saw around them might bring to their New England, they developed the season of Indian summer into a metaphor of continuity, a means of looking away from death to the golden glow of an illustrious past. Their assumption, in spite of the facts, that the season had a long and celebrated history going back to the Pilgrims, allowed them to speak of the losses that troubled them and to experience a reprieve from loss at the same time. The Brahmins were not alone in using descriptions of Indian summer to return to days gone by, Sweeting argues, finding a similar motive in poetry by John Greenleaf Whittier and Lydia Sigourney, who in "Indian Summer" romanticized Native Americans, memorializing and preserving them in her mid-century poem even as they were meeting their doom further west. Turning up intriguing references to the season in several other sources, Adam Sweeting provides a new and unsuspected angle on the imagining of New England. Readers who wish to learn more about the cultural meanings of Indian summer may consult his forthcoming book on the subject, *Beneath the Second Sun: A Cultural History of Indian Summer*, a chapter of which this article abridges.

Like Sweeting and other contributors to this issue, Kent Ryden deals with an idealized New England in his essay "Region, Place, and Resistance in Northern New England Writing." However, Ryden is concerned with all the realities of the New England experience the ideal leaves out. From the start, Ryden contends, the invention of New England as a location of farms, white-clapboard houses, and virtuous Yankees was "predicated on what New England was *not*" — an ideological abstraction that allowed those who perpetrated it to "cut through the messiness of real life on the ground in favor of an imagined ideal in the mind." Ryden's notion of a region invented as an escape from the facts of history appears in earlier essays of *Locating New England*, of course. Thus David Watters discusses how the tradition of self-inscription was developed by white New Englanders at the expense of non-whites;

Thomas Denenberg describes a revival of hand craftsmanship led by the upper class to deflect the threats of industrialization and immigration; Donna Cassidy writes of summer artists from the turbulent city who created images of a premodern Maine; and Adam Sweeting shows the Brahmin elite looking back nostalgically to the Pilgrim forefathers. But Ryden goes a step further, calling the mythological region constructed by such groups a “cultural weapon” used not only against the facts of history, but against the population of non-whites, ethnics, and the rural poor who actually live in the place. Among contemporary writers in northern New England, Kent Ryden finds a variety of supporters for his charge of cultural imperialism. Principal among them is Ernest Hebert, whose *Dogs of March* stages a protracted struggle between his central character Howard Elman, an unemployed millworker of Darby, New Hampshire, and Zoe Cutter, a new and wealthy neighbor from New York City, arriving with an image of a New England village “in her mind.” Another contemporary, Carolyn Chute, inveighs against the image of Maine that has been constructed by the state’s tourist office, bearing no resemblance to the working-class community she lives in. In its aim of creating a more inclusive and democratic New England, such writing, Ryden declares, is a political act. The case he makes in his rousing discussion is as disturbing as it is convincing.

Cynthia Huntington’s fine personal essay, “Dune Journal,” provides the best possible way to end this issue, for it shows how the organic tradition of imagining place continues in the work of a contemporary New England writer, one of our most gifted. Interestingly, Huntington’s piece echoes the themes of several scholarly essays in *Locating New England*. The region, she says, did not exist until it was invented by those who settled there, adding that New England, “peopled and storied for centuries ... carries its stories in our imaginations.” Yet its meaning is not monolithic, Huntington asserts; for New England is in fact many places, depending on our individual experiences with it. As one might expect, Huntington’s essay finally departs from the others here, since it is in the end less concerned with acts of the imagination that have given place a meaning than with the imaginative act in progress, incomplete until the writerly dialogue she conducts with her place is over. So her location on Cape Cod beside the Atlantic is not fixed and known but always becoming: “I write what I can’t be done with, this work of making a place in my mind out of the place in the world,” she says, and concludes: “The world, under our gaze, emerges into clarity but keeps its wild essence; still not human, not part of the language, and so never finished, whatever we might choose to call it.” In the excitement of Cynthia Huntington’s gaze off Cape Cod as she ponders work yet unfinished, it is hard not to think of the anticipation of the Puritans, gazing the other way toward the Massachusetts shore nearly 400 years before.