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The Last Page

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about this place *By Michael Burke*

The conversation usually goes like this: "So, what brought you to Colby?" I ask the student.

First she lists schools she was considering and the reasons, then there is a pause. A shrug, a smile. "I don't know," she says, puzzled, as though there were something mystical about her decision. A shuffle of feet. "I was doing campus visits with my mom and dad and I got here, and I walked around, and I knew this was the place. I just knew it." Her eyes get a little starry as she remembers the moment.

Though I know the answer, I ask, "Why? What about it?"

Now the answers get a little more varied but say the same thing: "It looked right." "It was so beautiful." "Colby looked like I'd always imagined my college would look."

I suppose we'd like it if students came to Colby for solid academic reasons: professors, courses, class sizes, even—gasp—the library. But those things are abstract before students actually attend a class, meet a professor, need a book. Only one thing is real at first: the looming, physical presence of the campus itself.

Attachment to place is a virtue, something to be encouraged. And choosing a college on the basis of aesthetics seems, on reflection, reasonable. It does raise the question, though—*what* makes Colby attractive enough to justify this attachment? Why is it recognized as one of the most beautiful colleges in the land? It can't *just* be the view from the steps of Miller (though that's pretty spectacular).

Is it the buildings, the setting, the landscaping and trees? The crisp straight lines on the

quad or the pockets of robust disorder among the order? Of course it's all of it. But certain features stand out, certain views inspire awe, devotion and, in the case of prospective students, commitment.

Start from the approaches. Jeff Kasser (philosophy) notes that signs on either end of campus are placed well before you get to buildings, so your first view of Colby is of its woods and fields. Indeed, the sign on the north entrance announces sky, since that's about all you see as you come up the steep hill.

I've always been partial to the view I get when I run the three-mile loop and come back across Interstate 95. When you make the curve at the stop sign and there is Johnson Pond and the library tower behind Champlin—that's impressive: a classic combination of horizontal and vertical, water and sky, natural and man-made.

David Mills '57 (English) without hesitation says, "The chapel, and the scene from the front steps of it across to Miller. I love that view; it's marvelous."

He's right. That vision leaps to mind whenever I think of the campus. After the memorial service for the English Department's John Mizner in January 1999, my wife and I left the chapel and stood on the landing buttoning our coats. Big soft snowflakes were drifting above and landing upon the snow-filled bowl between us and Miller, and it was as though the campus were becoming one thing, a white thing. I remembered Willa Cather's description of a cemetery in winter in "Neighbour Rosicky": "The

snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw things together like."

Chuck Lakin (library) says the effect of Colby comes from the fact that "there clearly is a plan here, but they haven't let that rule the campus—there are odd pieces that work, that fit, and one side of the campus doesn't have to match the other."

Elizabeth Sagaser (English) says it is Mayflower Hill itself. "It's the feeling of being on top of everything and that contact with the sky when you step out of Miller."

I mused on the question at home yet still didn't have a definitive answer, so I decided to walk the campus in late May. It was a painter's day, all colors: blue sky, red bricks, white clouds, new green leaves everywhere. I had a fine walk, through the arboretum and up to the Heights, from Runnals to the woodsmen's lot, and thought for awhile that Colby's loveliness might come from the series of plateaus the campus is built on; or the way trees dominate and gradually give way only in the center of campus to buildings; or the consistency of the horizon all around; or the brick construction and the emphasis on windows, suggesting it is intended to be a visual place. I realized I was having my own campus visit and hadn't gotten further than the prospective students. Like them, I may not be able to say what makes Colby so appealing; like them, I know it only when I see it.

—Michael Burke is an associate professor of English