December 1965

The Essays of Robert Peter Tristram Coffin

F. Celand Witham

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.4, December 1965, p.161-169
ing, that is something to draw on. Coffin worked hardest to suggest this permanence in *John Dawn* and *Thomas-Thomas-Ansill-Thomas*, but he was most effective in doing so where he seemed to try the least. *Red Sky in the Morning* has no elaborate machinery; it does not go beyond the lives of the two generations who live together in it; it certainly depends on no involved use of time sequence. We are never told directly the date of the story, and so we begin it assuming it takes place in our own time: then we gradually note that only a sailboat seems available where an emergency situation would seem to call for the speed of a power launch; or we note that a character plans to arrive in town on “the stage.” In brief, the first novel, *Red Sky in the Morning*, suggests — pervasively yet unobtrusively — the timelessness, sameness, and the cyclic quality of life which the author tried to recapture in his later novels.

THE ESSAYS OF
ROBERT PETER TRISTRAM COFFIN

By F. CELAND WITHAM

*A thrush singing in the woods* . . . It was the first bird I had ever really heard sing. It was the last marvel in a long chain of marvels. The first violets, like pieces of the sky, the first anemones, like drops of snow left over into April. I had had my first trip out past all houses, out of sight of all windows and doors. I was too tired to take in anything more. Then, when the shadow of the earth was climbing up the eastern sky, the bird sang among the distant trees. Three broken little songs rising higher and higher until they faltered and failed. All at once I knew what it was to be alone and among things so lovely that they made your heart ache. For you could never tell how beautiful they were even though you were to live a thousand years and have all the best words on the end of your tongue. My father thought it was weariness that made me burst suddenly into tears. But it was the thrush I have to thank for that.¹

From the more than 130 collected essays of Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, it would be possible to select literally scores of examples that would illustrate his sharpness of observation

and his facility with description. But any number of such examples would show only that Tristram Coffin possesses the essential tools required of any creative writer. What differentiates the work of Coffin from that of many others who have written engagingly and perceptively of the Maine scene is the sensitivity, the intenseness, of the response to his immediate surroundings. Unlike Louise Dickinson Rich, for example, who "took to the woods" and wrote impressively about that temporary experience, Coffin "emerges from" the geographical elements of the Harpswell-Casco Bay area. This is not to say that such a difference makes one writer "better" than another; it is to say that such "goings" and "comings" can have a profound effect upon the writer's attitude toward his subject and, hence, upon the tone of the finished product.

To the extent that "Naturalism" in writing functions on a premise that man is the product of his heredity and environment, Coffin can be said to be a naturalistic writer.² His frequently repeated phrase that "Maine is a state of mind" becomes more deeply understood when one encounters such statements as:

There is a religion to island weather. It has its holy iconography. It comes out in the lines of reachboats and dories, the economies of roof and gables on island fish-houses. It is an awareness to the intangibles of infinity. It is the life-and-death matter of changes of wind and tide which makes up the laws of this religion. An island man is a worshipful man. He goes like a small boy with his hand in the hand of a father too tall to see eye-to-eye with. He trusts and believes, because he knows how to read his salvation in a cud of fog, in the sound of a changed wind, the rote of distant surf on an unseen reef in the night.³

or again, when Coffin discusses the day-to-day existence of people in terms of their immediate environment:

I come of island people. I like to think island people have a special toehold on life. For like mountain people—and Maine people are very much like mountain people, and the sea has washed out all the

² Coffin differs from the Zola school of naturalism in that immediate social and economic problems are a secondary concern. Moreover, his outlook is characterized by joviality rather than morbidity.

³ "Island Living," Yankee Coast (New York, 1947), 43.
In a lighter vein that is perhaps more commonly associated with Coffin, a similar viewpoint is expressed in these terms:

... when people live in a place a long time, they grow to be like it. The dishes they cook up grow to be like it too. Maine is bayberry and sweetfern and fern-brake and balsams, and I like to think its people and their foods are pungent and sharp-flavored also. A Maine blueberry cannot help smelling like pitch-pines on a scorching day, for it ripened on just such a day and among those pines. A Maine boy acts the way State of Maine huckleberries taste. He cannot help it, for on any day late in August about half his weight is huckleberries.5

Thus it is that the majority of Coffin's essays deal with life as he once knew it off-shore from Harpswell, and hence it follows that many of his pieces are concerned with the close family relationship6 that such an isolated existence would necessitate. The theme of father idolatry, which occurs frequently in Coffin's essays, is better understood, therefore, when seen in terms of the writer's unusually specialized surroundings. Because he has experienced at first hand the family's total dependence upon the wits, resourcefulness, and sheer strength of the father, Coffin can write sensitively of his appreciation of that remarkable man without descending to a level of sentimentality:

... I learned more from my father's stories than I learned from books. I spent half of my time, up till I was seven or eight, on his knee, whenever he was resting, learning to draw pictures or learning what had made my father the man he was. I learned American history and the American philosophy of each tub's standing on its own bottom, I learned about Hannibal and John Paul Jones and what goes into the making of a strong man. I learned about ghosts and Indians also, for my father was up on them, too. He was the best story-teller I have ever heard. His stories stay with me still.7

Lest the impression be given that Coffin's essays are mere prose reflections of early childhood, it should be stated now that such is not the case. The self-reliance, hard work, frugality,
and isolation of the early life become materials for his definition of individualism and independence as he conceives such terms in his mature years. Coffin's conservative viewpoint regarding contemporary problems emerges as a natural consequence of his background.

People are being won away from islands and the perilous and hard and narrow life there, won to the mainland, the mainland ways, to the towns. Summer cottages have taken over many islands. Bridges have tied many of them to progress. But more of the islands have fallen vacant in the harder and brighter three-quarters of the year. It seems that the automobile and the movies, manufactured things, the chainstore idea and the herd psychology are winning.

Yet there are some tough and unherded islanders left. Maybe we can breed from these! They refuse to move over to the mainland and the mass formations of progress.8

When he attempts to apply such an island-philosophy to larger issues on the contemporary scene, however, Coffin tends to encounter a problem of over-simplification. In a defense of Wendell Willkie’s idea of “one world” — to which Coffin claims to subscribe — one reads the following:

...we Yankees started building ships hand-over-fist all up and down the Atlantic shoreline; and we went off to Havana and took the sugar right out of Britain's mouth. We smelled the rum of Jamaica and down we went for it. We took our potatoes and brought back cotton. We went farther and farther. To Nippon for silks, to Java for coffee, to Sumatra for pepper. We tied the continents together with our shuttles of wood and sail. We became the common carrier of common mankind. We had always been good at horse-trading and shopkeeping. Now we branched out and kept shop and traded for the whole earth. And none handsomer than these, the coast men of Maine. Small farmers, but we became big merchants and dressed our ladies in silks that whistled of China... We made friends, we made money.9

Here Coffin appears to interpret Willkie’s concept of “one world” simply as an expansion of the 19th-century American viewpoint. Thus he seems to miss Willkie’s argument that traditional concepts of such words as “friends” and “trade” require serious re-thinking in the world of the 1940s. The contrast in viewpoints can easily be seen.

8 “Island Living,” Yankee Coast, 45-46.
9 “Citizens In the Round,” Yankee Coast, 109.
All the leaks in this priceless reservoir [of good-will] are of our own making. For the very existence of this reservoir is built on confidence, in our integrity of purpose, our honesty in dealing, our ability in performance... There are other holes that we are punching in our reservoir of good-will which can be more easily repaired. One of them is the half-ignorant, half-patronizing way in which we have grown accustomed to treating many of the peoples of Eastern Europe and Asia.¹⁰

Coffin’s limitation as a debater of contemporary affairs becomes evident on the local scene when he attempts to apply his island-philosophy to the issue of conservation of Maine’s natural resources. His outrage as presented in his bill of particulars is forceful indeed:

We have allowed our “white coal”—Maine has limitless water-power—to get into the hands of monopolists at times. Worse still, we have let the mills at out waterfalls poison our rivers with chemicals and kill out all our famous salmon and shad. That pollution still goes on and makes a desert of some of the best rivers of America. We have slaughtered our forests, left the slash, and let forest fires burn up our soil and the substance of children to come. Here is our blackest sin. Unintelligence and greed are as common in Maine as elsewhere. I think what the lumber interests have done to the forest which was Maine deserves to rank as a capital crime.¹¹

But Coffin’s indictment appears to come into conflict with his island-philosophy of individual independence, and his argument consequently founders on a reef of wishful thinking.

We could have made Maine another Norway if we had farmed our forests intelligently. We may do it even yet. For in spite of our greed and shortsightedness, new balsams and pines keep coming up. Maine evergreens are hard to kill. We have always been able to raise a new crop.¹²

In any case, it is for qualities more characteristic of Coffin’s sensitive and jovial personality—qualities more closely allied

¹² Ibid., Coffin’s point is made as part of a more comprehensive discussion in which Arnold Toynbee’s statement of “Maine, the ‘Museum Piece’” is challenged. (A Study of History, abr. I-VI by D. C. Somervell (New York, 1947), 146-147.) The dubious success of Coffin’s challenge is similar to that of Kenneth Roberts’ as examined by Paul Fullam, Colby Library Quarterly, III (May 1951), 21-22.
to Coffin, the poet — that readers will turn to his essays. Here, when he is at his best, one can share experiences, either of the distant or recent past, in which Coffin is intimately involved. If he is describing a Christmas homecoming of some forty years past, his reader will be made to feel the cold and sense the swerve of the pung as it glides over the “diamond” ice of Casco Bay. When he provides his reader with a recipe for his father’s codfish chowder or lobster stew, he garnishes it with a mouth-watering description of the finished product. To be at his best, Coffin must be dealing with a subject to which he has an intensely personal relationship. There are exceptions, to be sure, such as “The Harvest of Diamonds” in which the commercial harvesting of ice is vividly described; but such exceptions are rare.

At the risk of mutilating one of his best pieces, some examples from “Angel’s-Eye View” will be selected to illustrate the devices by which the characteristic “Coffin tone” is established.

There are lots of ways of viewing the coast of Maine. But the angels have the best one. From high above... But you can’t have everything. So I am content to see Maine shores in the apocalyptic new way, only a handful of years old.

The best view is from an airplane. Fly over the coast if you want to see it at its Book of Revelation best.

One sees here the way in which Coffin juxtaposes typical Maine idiom (“lots of” for “many” and “handful” for an exact number) with Biblical, and less typical, references (“apocalyptic new way” and “Book of Revelation best”) which reinforce the angel image. Such juxtapositions occur frequently in Coffin’s essays, with varying degrees of success. Many times he will select a phrase of Chaucer’s that serves well; at other times his erudition will lead him to introduce Vergil or Donne quite unexpectedly — sometimes, so it seems, between the fried pork and the onions of a chowder. But such solecisms are infrequent, and they do not seriously affect the over-all enjoyment of any particular essay. It is the easy-going, conversational

---

13 Coffin’s recipes are not recommended to either the sick or the squeamish. If it is a beast or a fish, it all goes into the pot; if it is a fowl, then everything goes in except the feathers: those go into a pillow!

14 Maine Doings, 38-44.

15 Yankee Coast, 1-14.
style, together with the wry humor, that has the long-lasting effect on the reader. Examples of these qualities are abundant in the essay at hand, but one must suffice here:

I wasn't too sure of my friend [Stephen Etnier] as a rival of the angels. He had got his flight training more or less on the correspondence-school level. It was sketchy. It was full of gaps. He did not know too much about the insides of internal combustion engines.

The penchant for understatement, a distinguishing characteristic of the Maine idiom, is discernible in such phrases as “I wasn’t too sure” and “more or less on the correspondence-school level.” The implication is, of course, that the pilot is either highly incompetent or dangerously irresponsible and that Coffin is extremely apprehensive for his own safety. The humor lies in his refusal to admit openly his fright.

An inclination sometimes to over-write emerges also in this example. Coffin's lack of confidence in the pilot is humorously established by the phrase “correspondence-school level.” His addition of such statements as “full of gaps,” “sketchy,” et cetera tend to dull the effectiveness of the original point. Another example occurs three paragraphs later when Coffin describes what appears to him to be an imminent crash into a lighthouse. “But Seguin is an old lighthouse, built in President Washington’s time, 1795, and I didn’t want anything to happen to it.” But the wry understatement here becomes somewhat blunted when Coffin adds: “A good friend of mine tends it, and I shouldn’t want anything to happen to him or to his fine family.” Lacking the incongruity of concerns that the earlier statement contains, the second tends to call attention merely to itself. The piquant humor of the incident is thereby marred.

Although Coffin does not at all times edit his essays as objectively as one might wish, it must nevertheless be admitted that the flaws become comparatively obscure when his humor, sensitivity, and imagination are all operating at full sail. Evidence again is provided by “Angel’s-Eye View.”

I got excited and reached over to lay hands on whatever controlled our height. It was then my life-belt broke. After that, I had to depend on gravity and native common sense, and the lust to live, to stay put in my seat.
The door on my side, secured with a loop of picture wire, kept com­
ing open every time we leaned my side down . . . I had to hold the
door to with my right hand all the time.16

By use of careful organization, Coffin achieves a nice balance
between farcical and serious elements in a single essay. In
contrast to the incident described above, for example, one en­
counters numerous instances where Coffin the serious man and
sensitive observer takes command.

Down below was my bay—all of it at once—from Cape Small
Point to Portland Head Light and the cape named for Gloriana, the
glittering queen of the Faerie Queene. It was so wide, being all there,
that it curved down at each side with the curvature of the earth. There
was the marriage of land and sea, islands and hills and forests, that
means the center of the universe to me.

Thus “Angel’s-Eye View” becomes a “Coffin woodcut” by liter­
ary means. By either bold strokes of contrast or by subtle lines
of transition, Coffin creates here a complete picture of the Casco
Bay topography and a self-portrait of the humorous and sensi­tive artist.

There remains another characteristic of this essayist which
leads perhaps most directly to the question of the extent to
which Coffin’s work is “typically Maine.” Almost never in
these pieces does he employ dialogue as a means of establish­
ing the native Maine type. When he does, as in the case of
“Hens and Hounds and Hants and Wars,”17 the language tends
toward a flatness that is wanting in the richness of Coffin, and
lacking in the terseness of Maine understatement. One sus­
pects, for two reasons, that Coffin himself is aware of such
problems with dialogue: first, he frequently avoids its use; and
second, he tends to over-inflate the incidents when dialogue is
attempted. In “Hens and Hounds,” for example, the incidents
become exaggerated to a point that defies credulity.18

16 Stephen Etnier, an artist who resides in Harpswell, assures the present
writer that the plane was “perfectly air-worthy.” Coffin’s description of its
dilapidated condition is entirely the product of his own creation.
17 Yankee Coast, 69-85.
18 It may be significant that Coffin is re-telling stories of his brother here.
The exaggeration may result from Coffin’s personal non-involvement in the
incidents.
Most significant, perhaps, is Coffin's reluctance to employ dialogue in the character delineation of his father. Words and phrases that distinguished the father's vocabulary are listed, but the man is never presented as a character speaking in the first person. Similarly, Coffin offers isolated examples of words and phrases that are generally indigenous to the Casco Bay region, but again the "give and take" of dialogue is absent. It has been noted earlier that Coffin adapts some elements of the Casco Bay idiom to achieve his own easy-going style, but such elements are judiciously selected and used in conjunction with the vocabulary of Coffin the poet and well educated man. It is to Owen Davis — another Maine recipient of a Pulitzer Prize — rather than to Coffin, that one should turn for examples of the terse understatement and the rhythm that distinguishes the Maine speech pattern. 19

What emerges finally from the reading of Coffin's essays is an autobiographical account of an unusual man. To the extent that the essays concern the Maine coast 20 and to the extent that they frequently espouse the virtues of personal independence, hard work, frugality, and conservative thought it can be said that they reflect much that is Maine's natural beauty and its "state of mind."

But what emerges far more poignantly in these pieces is the individuality of Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, the poet, the educated man who views his world in a distinctly uncommon way. It could not be otherwise: Coffin grew up in a geographical environment that is unique; he was raised in the midst of an unusual family by a father who was far from being a common man. All this, together with a sensitive literary talent and a unique educational background, accounts for these essays that reflect, more than anything else, a man's life "as he has found it jovial and beautiful."

19 See Icebound, especially Act I.
20 Book of Crowns and Cottages (New Haven, 1925), Coffin's first volume of collected essays, has been purposely omitted from the present discussion because it concerns Coffin's experiences in England as a Rhodes Scholar. "The Dean's Croquet," in that volume, however, is highly recommended.