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Maine Fiction before 1840: A Microcosm

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by DONALD A. SEARS

The trend of early American fiction from the sentimental and gothic novels of the opening years of the nineteenth century through the gradual discovery of American material in the romances of the twenties and thirties to the emergence of regionalism is accepted for the broad panorama of the new nation. The present study looks at the northern outpost of Maine to see to what extent the generalizations are to be confirmed or revised in the microcosm of Portland. In the period before the railroads cut off the northern port, Portland bid fair to becoming a cultural center, but after 1840 it slipped rapidly behind Boston and New York. But in the period of the Republic, Maine's chief city was developing its own circle of writers.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the citizens of Maine were far from restricted in their reading fare and tastes. The lending libraries of Portland bear witness to the popularity of the racy novels and tales of the period, a substantial number of which were by native authors. Serious works of history and theology were outdistanced by sentimental and gothic romances, although these often paid token service to a moral or socially uplifting purpose. As a boy in this town, the future novelist John Neal steeped himself in the latter, growing especially fond of the works of William Godwin and Charles Brockden Brown. While his budding liberalism drew him to the radical philosophy and psychology of Godwin and Brown, he also read the conservative female novelists.

One such, Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood (1759–1855), might especially have caught his interest, for she was Maine's first novelist. Mrs. Wood as a conservative and Neal as a liberalist were the most successful and prolific of the Portland group. Born at the home of her grandfather, Judge Jonathan Sayward, at York, Maine, Sally Wood was raised in an atmosphere of high Tory society. Next to his friend Sir William Pepperill, Judge Sayward was prior to the Revolution the richest man in Maine, and held the King's appointment as Judge of Probate for York County. Sally's father, Nathaniel Barrell, of the Boston shipping


2. See Donald A. Sears, "Libraries and Reading Habits in Early Portland (1763–1836)," Maine Historical Society Quarterly, XII (Spring 1973), 151–165.
family, was King’s Counsellor for New Hampshire. Both men were Tories during the Revolution, so that Sally grew up in the gay Tory circle of York and Kittery, Maine. These facts colored her pictures of society in the novels she started writing in 1800. She knew no life but that of aristocratic ease, for in spite of confiscations following the Revolution, her grandfather salvaged enough of his fortune to be able to build her a house as a wedding gift. In it she lived (at York) for twenty-one years, as a widow after 1783, and reared there her three children. Only when the youngest child, Richard Keating, was seventeen, did she find extra time on her hands and turn to writing to fill these “leisure moments.” She so organized her day, she tells us, “that not one social, or one domestic duty, have [sic] been sacrificed, or postponed by her pen.”

It seems likely that the impetus for Sally Wood’s first novel, *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (1800), came from reading Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond*, which had appeared in the preceding year. In this chaotic book, Ormond has imbibed dangerous doctrines from the secret order of Illuminati on the Continent. But Brown casts glamor over his portrait of this superman villain, and seems to enjoy letting Ormond scoff at the triad of New England complacencies: marriage, religion, and private property. The turn of the century was a period of shrill and often ridiculous attacks on the Illuminati, their supposed influence in the French Revolution, and their suspected plots and machinations in America. Brown’s own inclination toward the liberal doctrines of Europe kept him from joining the hue and cry; and although he brings Ormond to a conventionally bad end, he treats his villain with sympathy. This would never do, especially in the high society in which Sally Wood moved. She hoped, she wrote in the “Preface” to *Julia*, to show the “illuminated baron” de Launa as a monster, “without principles,” and thus to counteract the effect of Brown and to show the French Revolution as a “revolution from piety and from morality.” In short, “the motive which induced its publication was a wish to do good, or at least to guard against evil.” The title page boldly proclaimed,

This volume to the reader’s eye displays
Th’ infernal conduct of abandoned man;
When French Philosophy infects his ways,
And pours contempt on Heav’n’s eternal plan.

As her models Sally Wood had the host of sentimental and gothic


4. The attack on the Illuminati was sparked by Jedidiah Morse’s sermon at the New North Church, Boston, May 9, 1798. Soon all New England was excited and the attack was extended to include the Masons. In Portland, Brother Amos Stoddard, addressing the Masons on July 24, 1799, apologized for the infiltration of some Illuminati into the Masonic order, where they spread “their revolutionary poison.” For a study of this subject see Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York, 1918).
novels then available, but it is probable that she owed a special debt to Sophia King's *Waldorf; or, the Dangers of Philosophy* (England, 1798). Of American authors she professed admiration for Sarah Wentworth Morton ("Philenia") and Judith Sargent Murray ("Constantia"). Thus we expect little variation on the elements of the female novel and we get none. The orphaned heroine is pure, although assailed by such dread dangers as fire, starvation, accusation of theft, and threat of rape. About her birth hangs a veil of mystery, only pierced at the end when she is revealed as the noble half-sister of the villain. Her lover Colwort also turns out to be of noble parentage, and the two retire from France to England to start an ideal family. Gothic elements have their full share as Julia pays a nocturnal visit to the de Launa tomb. There the caretaker points out the small coffins of children, over which Julia may shed a pitying tear, and the new coffin of de Launa's latest, discarded mistress, which may not be opened lest it prove "offensive." He does open, however, the coffin of de Launa's mother, dead twenty years; the features are intact, but as Julia attempts to cut off a lock of hair, she is startled by a sigh and touches the face, promptly crumbling it to dust. Borrowing the technique of Mrs. Radcliffe, Sally Wood leaves the sigh unexplained until near the end, when all such interest-gaining "mysteries" are clarified.

The novel is further spun out by the device of the story within a story, for there are no less than five long tales recited by various acquaintances of Julia. One of these, related by de Launa's dying mistress, is based on the then famous letters of an Italian nun to an English nobleman. Also used is the device of the death-bed letter that, when finally read, reveals many mysteries; and Julia is provided with ample opportunities to show her loyal and scrupulous attendance at the death-bed, for "beauty, hath superior force, when attendant upon the chamber of sickness; and the angel never looks so far, as when softening the calamities to which mortality are incident" (p. 59). The height of sensibility is reached, however, when near the end of Julia's trials she and her benefactress (now revealed as Colwort's mother) spend the night together in a room adjoining Colwort's, where he lies wasted from prison fever. The two ladies of "feeling" enjoy the thrills that come as they are able to "hear him turn upon his bed, [and] distinguish his breath...." (p. 281).

The setting of the first novel was the European never-never land of sentiment and Gothicism, a locale defended by Mrs. Wood. In June, 1800, she had written in the "Preface" to *Julia*: "It may perhaps be objected, that the annals of our own country display a vast field for the imagination, and that we need not cross the Atlantic in search of mate-

5. One of the better sections of *Julia* (pp. 81ff.) takes the heroine's lover, Colwort, to America, where he spends a social evening in Boston. There he meets these two ladies, and writes to Julia with extravagant praise of their personalities, their writings, and their ability to combine literature with unstinted domestic duties.
trials to found the moral tale or amusing story upon. But an aversion to introduce living characters, or those recently dead, rendered Europe a safer, though not a more agreeable theatre.” But less than a year later she had been captured by literary nationalism. By March, 1801, she was seeing Dorval, a novel about the recent Georgia land speculations, through the press. Again she begins her novel with an apology for employing her pen instead of her needle, but now pleads nationalism as an excuse: “Hitherto we have been indebted to France, Germany, and Great Britain, for the majority of our literary pleasures. Why should we not aim at independence, with respect to our mental enjoyments, as well as for our more substantial gratifications, I know not. Why must the amusements of our leisure hours cross the Atlantic?”

Even in Julia, the main scenes of which were France and Spain, Mrs. Wood had provided through the letters of Colwort views of America extending from “Hollowel” (Hallowell) on the Kennebec to Mt. Vernon in Virginia. Now in Dorval she described the North Shore culture of Massachusetts as she knew it. Particularly in the early chapters (I-IV) we get a good picture of the period from 1783 to 1800, ending in the excited prosperity of the turn of the century. But when Dorval appears, possessing “under the mask of smooth but blunt hypocrisy, . . . a heart so corrupt . . . that a villain would have been shocked to inspect it” (p. 52), the actual New England setting vanishes into the twilight region of romance.

In her third work, Amelia: or, the Influence of Virtue (1802), the setting is again “north of Boston,” but the tale itself is, through the device of a narrator, quickly transferred to England. Mrs. Wood has by this time improved her ability to tell a story, and invents a narrator to relate the tale of Amelia, a contemporary Patient Griselda. The narrative device works well for the first fifty pages, but is abruptly abandoned (“For the future I shall not notice the very frequent pauses that domestic calls . . . occasioned . . .”) and is not resumed until the very end. She had first used the device as early as Julia and was to use it most successfully in “Storms and Sunshine” in her last book, Tales of the Night (1827). Further, Mrs. Wood had developed her use of letters within the narrative, so that by the time of Amelia she was able to employ them as the vehicles for carrying some of the heaviest emotional material, and had learned the trick of ending chapters at highly dramatic moments. For example, chapter XVII of Amelia ends with the heroine threatened with instant death.

It is interesting that the uneasy wedding of sentimental and gothic elements in Mrs. Wood’s first two novels has in Amelia been broken up. The first half of the novel is predominantly sentimental; the latter half is filled with gothic horror. Mrs. Wood now had well in hand the sentimental formula that was to carry her through Ferdinand and Elmira; A Russian Story (1804). Two girls are contrasted. One, starting in poverty
and living through trials, wins by her moral scruples, right principles, and selfless kindness final happiness, while the other, starting in the lap of luxury, by selfishness, indulgence, and giddiness brings herself through the "miseries" of seduction to a shameful and diseased end. Whether they are Amelia and Harriet in England, Elmira and Maria in Russia, or Aurelia and Elizabeth in Dorval's America matters little; the heroine's chastity triumphs and she rises above her mysterious birth to the heights of society, while her foolish friend slips from seduction to penury, remorse, and death. Also borrowed from sentimental literature are: the romantic, country retreat, be it in New Hampshire (Dorval), or in Poland (Ferdinand); the duties and pleasures of benevolence, signally shown by the Countess de Launa in Julia; the wretched results of seduction, dwelt upon with the dying Leonora in Julia and Elizabeth in Dorval; and that supreme test of the patient and dutiful wife, her willingness to adopt the bastards of her erring husband (Amelia).

In Amelia these devices carry through half-way, until the virtuous wife has triumphed, the "debauched" husband has been saved from himself, and virtue has been vindicated. The novel seems about to end when Amelia is abducted by Baron Volpoon, a literary descendent of the "illuminated baron" of Julia, and the book runs on as a gothic tale. The charnel house scene in Julia is repeated with variations in the other novels. Flight and pursuit, stormy weather, and ruined castles combine to terrorize the heroines, who are threatened with rape and murder. The villain is always an atheist and often a bastard; his heart is always corrupt and he lets his scheming head override that gentler organ, the heart. Whether he is a speculator like Dorval, an avaricious wretch like Volpoon, or a political self-seeker like de Launa, his specialty in villainy is the titillating one of seduction. In handling these ingredients, Mrs. Wood shows some progress, for by Ferdinand (1804) she knows how to open dramatically with the abducted heroine wandering through the galleries of a strange, half-ruined castle illumined fitfully by flashes of lightning. From this point in the story, it is some time before the mystery concerning her presence there is solved.

In spite of derivativeness, the novels of Sally Wood are not wholly contemptible and are still interesting as social documents concerning the attitudes of the old New England aristocracy. With John Neal we can agree that they are "about as good as we generally meet with among the novels of the age. . . ."6 That they were reasonably popular we can infer from the presence of Julia on the list of novels read between 1806 and 1822 by Madame de Rieux of Virginia,7 and the fact that Samuel Butler of Baltimore brought out Ferdinand and Elmira. (The three previous works had been printed at the local and therefore favorably prejudiced presses in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and at least one of

them by subscription.) After the appearance of *Ferdinand* in 1804, Mrs. Wood did not publish again until 1827, when *Tales of the Night* was issued by Thomas Todd of Portland. Containing two stories, this book comprised the first volume of a projected two-volume set. In it Mrs. Wood discarded Europe as a locale and much of gothicism as a method. The resulting tales are more orderly than the novels and in their quiet details of social life are occasionally realistic, though they are marred by the old-fashioned views of the authoress. On the eve of the Jacksonian era her praise of patronage and rank sounded oddly. Her rags-to-riches story of "The Hermitage," therefore, in spite of details of life at a colonial governor's mansion of "regal magnificence," or because of them, failed to find an audience for the book. It is not surprising that John Neal objected to the book's "English" practice of distinguishing ranks, and to the authoress's emotional adherence to Federalist views. Yet his review in the *Yankee* (January 16, 1828) was not severe; perhaps he held himself in check when dealing with a favorite "grand lady" of the town where she was known as Madame Wood. Although he could without strain praise the "real life" in the book, in all honesty he had to admit that a regard for propriety had led "our authoress in her dislike for . . . sentiment and slip-slop . . . a little too far into the stateliness and detail of other days."

No one, however, has ever charged John Neal's own novels with stateliness, although they have been labelled with some reason hasty, rhapsodic, and even mad. When Neal with characteristic stubbornness determined in 1827 to practice law in Portland because the citizens were determined that he should not, he already had six novels to his credit. All but *Brother Jonathan* (Edinburgh and London, 1825) had been written in his Baltimore period (1817–1823), although they had been variously published in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Since these novels have been fully treated elsewhere and do not belong integrally to Portland culture, we shall discuss them only as they relate to the later work of Neal or reveal his ideas and influence. We shall be dealing more particularly with two novels: *Rachel Dyer* (Portland, 1828), and *The Down-Easters* (New York, 1833). The first of these is the better written and more completely readable today in its re-creation of the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century, yet more thoroughly entertaining is *The Down-Easters*.

8. In 1804 she married General Abiel Wood, and resided in Wiscasset, Maine, until his death in 1811 brought her to Portland. Although she was Sally Keating at the time of the publication of her four novels, they appeared anonymously, and I have followed the practice of Lyle H. Wright, Herbert R. Brown, and other authorities on the early American novel in referring them to Mrs. Sally Wood. An attempt at this date to label the novels "by Mrs. Keating" would be pedantry at the expense of clarity.
9. The Maine Historical Society owns a manuscript story by Mrs. Wood, dealing with the period of the American Revolution. It is likely that this had been intended for the unissued second volume.
10. See, for example, Benjamin Lease, *That Wild Fellow John Neal* (Chicago, 1971), and Donald A. Sears, *John Neal* (Boston: Twayne, 1978).
Rachel Dyer is a carefully documented tale based upon the fortunes of George Burroughs, an irregular preacher who had for a time been at Falmouth, later Portland. This local connection may have been Neal’s incentive in taking up the tale, but his own open-mindedness about the possibilities of communication with the spirit world may have led his reading to witchcraft. Still further, as a lawyer he would have been drawn to the old court records of the Salem trials. Whatever the initial impulse, he first prepared the story of the Quakeress Rachel Dyer and her friend George Burroughs for Blackwood’s Magazine, but by one of those misunderstandings that came easily to one of Neal’s turbulent character he withdrew the manuscript. The novel is thus an expansion and revision of the earlier tale, and shows in its greater control the reworking of the author. This is a rare quality for Neal, who nearly always dashed his novels off at white heat and sent them to the printer unrevised. And there was a second reason for the extraordinary care he gave this work. In his first year back at Portland, he was on his good behavior, determined to win back the respect he had lost because of his outspoken articles in the English journals. The Yankee, which he edited through 1828 and 1829, sought to justify Neal to his countrymen; and Authorship in 1830 is less of a novel than a combination apologia and travelogue. In 1828, using the material he had at hand, Neal published Rachel Dyer with the same purpose, hoping that “it may be regarded by the wise and virtuous of our country as some sort of atonement for the folly and extravagance of my earlier writing” (p. iv). By way of further justification he included with the novel an “Unpublished Preface” that was to have accompanied the original tale in Blackwood’s. This preface elaborates on Neal’s reaction to the query, “Who reads an American book?”—a query which had taken him on his one-man mission to England—and calls for “another Declaration of Independence, in the great Republic of Letters.”

For all its superior control, Rachel Dyer is marked in two respects as the work of John Neal: the titanism of Burroughs, and the deformity of the heroine, Rachel. In Errata (1823) Neal had presented the dwarf Hammond as “a creature of great moral beauty and strength,” proving the falsity of novelists who felt that personal beauty and moral beauty are inseparably connected. Now in making the hump-backed, red-freckled Rachel his heroine, Neal was returning to this favorite idea. In the “Preface” to Rachel Dyer, he correctly credits Godwin with perceiving this truth and finds in Brown, Scott, and Byron “that a towering in-

12. For all his hard-headed Yankeeism, Neal is peculiarly sympathetic to the possibilities even of witchcrafter (see Rachel Dyer, p. 24). As for extra-sensory perception, his novels abound in examples of the power of friendship in giving psychic warning of impending danger. While this might be explained as a literary device, the frequency as well as the tone of the passages suggests that Neal had an open mind on the subject. See, for example, The Down-Easters, pp. 11, 42.

13. For this reason I shall have little to say about this “novel,” although it belongs to Neal’s Portland period.
tellect may inhabit a miserable body," but contends that by making their titans into villains, or at best outlaws, these writers obscured what Neal wanted to be irrefutably illustrated. And so he couples great energy with great goodness, and directs the titanism of his heroes into virtuous paths; since their principles are right, they act for the best, even when opposing the law, which may be inhumanly rigid. George Burroughs, like Copely and Archibald in 'Seventy-Six, Molton in Randolph, and Hammond in Errata, is a fusion of the Byronic superman with Neal's projection of his own energy, iconoclasm, and revolt. These violent figures are more than literary puppets to Neal; they are his heroic ideals personified, and much of his personal violence came from the effort to imitate his own creations. Indeed his titans are presentations of what Neal hoped he was, and great chunks of the early novels are purely autobiographical. But it was one thing to have titanic heroes, even a deformed titan like Hammond; and quite another to furnish the titan with a heroine of the same proportions. Yet this is what Neal now did, for he writes "If God ever made a heroine, Rachel Dyer was a heroine—a heroine without youth or beauty, with no shape to please, with no color to charm the eye, with no voice to delight the ear" (p. 148). In an age of such paragons as Mrs. Wood's Amelia, it is testimony of Neal's power that he was able to make the reader believe in Rachel's genuine beauty of the soul and spirit.

It is not for the romantic doctrine of the titan, however Neal worked it out, that Rachel Dyer is readable today, but for the vivid, dramatic recreations of the trial scenes at Salem. As a lawyer and novelist Neal had the two talents needed to shake the dust from the old court records and to revitalize the emotions and passions that had been dried out by law jargon. As Burroughs pleads for the life of a foolish old woman about to be sentenced for witchcraft, Neal is able through his hero's mouth to present his own liberal views. He can expose the injustice of the old laws with their requirement that the burden of the proof be placed on the accused in establishing his innocence, and with their inequality in letting the state subpoena witnesses but denying this right to the accused. Neal (unlike Mrs. Wood) had no longing for the "good old days"; republican America was much preferable to the America of crown colonies, and the principle that proved this was "that where human life is thought much of, there liberty is; and that just in proportion to the value of human life are the number and variety, the greatness and the strength of the safeguards forms and ceremonies [sic], which go to make it secure, if not altogether inaccessible" (p. 104).

This was not the first or last time that Neal was to use fiction as a vehicle for his opinions, for all his novels are built around some point he wishes to make. Keep Cool (1817) had been written to discourage dueling, a crusade that he adopted from Godwin and was to return to in his

14. See particularly Errata, I, 59ff., for Neal's Portland schooling, and Randolph, I, 80ff., for his days as an itinerant artist.
self-defensive  

Errata (1823). 'Seventy-Six rewrote history in terms of the theory that great times produce great men. And there were frequent side issues, such as his defense of King Philip, the Indian warrior, in Rachel Dyer (p. 38f.); his constant preaching of literary nationalism; and his digressions into essays on literature and art.

In sexual standards, too, Neal was a liberal, and a true disciple of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, whose names were anathema to Mrs. Wood. The second volume of The Down-Easters (1833) presents evidence at every turn. The narrator professes his willingness to release his hypothetical wife to a lover, for “such is my nature, and such it would be toward a wife, were she unfaithful to me; I should only say to her—Go—go and be happy; I forgive you . . .” (II, 15). Moreover, ceremonies of marriage are in themselves meaningless without the attendant marriage of hearts. The seduced girl can with truth cry that “I was your wife, as much as I could be, for I had married you according to the faith of a heart overflowing with unutterable love—the purest and warmest love . . .” (II, 97).

There may have been a hint of these feelings in the sentimental novels, but the standard was not reciprocal. An erring husband could return to the pure embrace of his wife, but a fallen woman could never be forgiven. Although the husband of Mrs. Wood’s Amelia could refuse to consummate the arranged marriage until he could say he loved his wife, there was no hint that the legality of the ceremony was in any way abrogated by the lack of true union. Neal was willing to go to the logical extreme. In his tale “Bill Frazier, the Fur-Trader,” which filled out the second volume of The Down-Easters, this is made explicit. Bill has married by tribal ceremonies an Indian wife, who learning of white customs comes to feel unmarried by white standards. Despite Bill’s logical protest, “In sight of Heaven you are my wife; In the sight of Heaven, we are married,” the maid is troubled and grows melancholy. Too much of a realist to insist that the ideal truth of Bill’s protest can work in this corrupt world, Neal brings the story to a tragic close with the death of the Indian maid; but the utopian truth remains: “If a man loves a woman, he wants no law to bind him to her. If he does not love her, no law can bind him to her” (II, 168). To bring the ideal closer to reality, Neal wholeheartedly espoused feminism, and “Bill Frazier” was one contribution to the movement.

What has been said so far about the novels of John Neal might give

15. From principle he had refused to duel with the poet William Coote Pinckney and had been posted as a coward. Errata is advertised as the confession of a purported “coward.”

16. See 'Seventy-Six, I, 247.

17. These are found especially in his one epistolary novel, Randolph.

18. Neal delivered a lecture on the rights of women at about the time he was writing this story.
the false impression that they are strikingly modern, either as social tracts or as "slices of life." In their totality they are neither of these things, for the chaotic energy and obscurities of plot place them directly in the school of Charles Brockden Brown. The gothic elements are numerous throughout the novels, and in the second volume of *The Down-Easters* these elements combine in a way that looks forward to the tales of Poe. 19 The Byronic villain Gerard has been lured to a secluded house in a blasted wood. Strange clouds play overhead as he approaches it to keep an assignation, and the form of his hated enemy looms through the mist but disappears. Unearthly sounds pervade the scene as the demonic Claire leads him to the darkened chamber where waits an unknown girl. There in the chamber is enacted a terrible scene of lust, suicide, necrophilia, and revenge from which Gerard emerges a shattered man. But this is not Poe’s story; Neal solves the mystery in traditional fashion with a letter from the dead girl, and all the supernatural happenings are explained *ex post facto* as natural phenomena. In its feeble conclusion the scene belongs to the method of Mrs. Radcliffe, not Poe.

Unfortunately Neal was a better critic than self-critic, and his novels are a hodge-podge of disunified and disparate sections. Whereas the last half of *The Down-Easters* is a gothic novel conveying Godwinian ethics, the first volume is a sociological study in Yankee characteristics, mannerisms, and folkways. As such it is penetrating, accurate, and amusing. The plot is merely a swindling anecdote expanded in all directions by details of character. In this, as well as in the setting aboard a steamboat, it may have provided suggestions to Herman Melville for his novel of Mississippi steamboat types, *The Confidence Man* (1857). By bringing together on one boat Yankees and Kentuckians, Northerners and Southerners, Neal is able to give a cross-section of American manners, and to provide the fun of frontier humor. This was a vein he had mined as early as 1823 when he had Hammond accosted by a West Virginian in the exaggerated boasts of the west:

"By Gaud!" said the fellow. . . . "gee us your hand. . . . Do you know what I am? Steamboat!—run agin me, run agin a snag. . . . jam up. . . . got the best jack-knife, prettiest sister, best wife, run faster, jump higher, and whip any man in all Kentuck, by Gaud!" [one sentence omitted]  
"Come," said he, "come out, if you are a man. . . . rough and tumble." 20

Such early use of frontier braggartism as well as Neal’s creation of Yankee "characters" may well have influenced the Portland writer Seba Smith in the development of his Major Jack Downing.

But possibly more important than the example of his fiction were Neal’s critical remarks about the novel and about style. Where Mrs. Wood had apologized for fiction as the product of leisure hours de-

signed to improve the leisure hours of others by inculcating good moral
principles and exposing vice, Neal held that the novel was the highest
form of prose composition. Just as he had broadened poetry to cover all
emotive language, he included under the novel all fiction, whether
drama or verse, "where imaginary creatures, invested with all the
attributes of humanity, agitated by the passions of our nature, are put to
the task of entertaining or terrifying us." Since the novel is more influ­
ential than any other form of literature, being read by people who never
read anything else, it behooves the men of greatest talent to provide the
best possible novels. Neal therefore has no patience with men who are
content to leave this duty of novel writing to "women and children," for
"to write a good novel, a man should be a poet, a dramatist, a tragick
and comic writer, a philosopher, a preacher, and an orator. . . ." In
his own way Neal had been most of these, and by his own standards as a
novelist he could at least approach the starting line.

In matters of style he hated equally the conversational limpidity of an
Addison and the heavy, rhetorical prose of a Johnson, and pled for an
organic style, one that would change with the subject and emotions
treated. Thus he has his narrator in 'Seventy-Six explain that "My style
may often offend you. I do not doubt that it will. I hope that it will. . . .
It will be the style of a soldier, plain and direct, where facts are to be
narrated; of a man, roused and inflamed, when the nature of man is out­
raged—of a father—a husband—a lover and a child, as the tale is of
one, or of the other" (I, 17). Neal was seeking "natural writing" for his
fiction and this, he wrote, "I would define to be what anybody, in the
same situation, would naturally say—if he could:—. . . broken and
incoherent at times—for such is the language of passion. . . ." The
danger of Neal's theory was that in trying too hard to be colloquial, he
often became rambling, incoherent, or as he put it, "fervid; varied; and
abrupt." None the less, in theory, no matter how far he fell short in
practice, Neal's contribution was great. He demonstrated the ridicu­
lousness of adhering to a single style for all kinds of material, and led
the way toward such far-off experiments in virtuosity as James Joyce's
Ulysses. Nor did Neal always fail. His passionate scenes now seem too
distemperate and rhapsodic, but he had rhapsodic models in Godwin
and Brown. All three men were concerned with the psychology of abnor­
mal states, and their experimental styles were one means of probing
beneath the surface. Occasionally Neal struck off a peculiarly apt image
that would open the mind of his character in a flash, as when Oadley
relates that "My heart . . . felt, as if it had been drifting about in a cold
rain, for a week, drenched and soaked through—chilled"; or when

21. 'Seventy-Six, II, 223.
22. 'Seventy-Six, II, 228.
25. 'Seventy-Six, II, 76.
Neal captures a psychological state in *Errata* (I, 294): "I thought I should never get to her—never! It was like running in my sleep, with a murderer after me." At its best the varying style can be powerfully affective. For example, after a good deal of rhetoric, Neal ends a chapter in quiet, controlled prose; two soldiers are leaving for an impending battle and their final farewell might have been played for the sentimental values. Instead, the imaginative final sentence succeeds by restraint:

Rodman and Copely then embraced their wives—in one long, long embrace, again—and, without turning a glance toward the rest of us—except the children, whom both kissed and blessed—leaving their manly tears upon their sweet faces—set off, at full speed, from the house. *It was a bitter cold morning for the season.*

It was for such passages that Neal won the critical acclaim of his contemporaries. Hasty and rhapsodic his works are, but often enough they exhibit flashes of genius.

Even in his few tales, two of which filled out *The Down-Easters* and three of which appeared in successive issues of the *New England Magazine* in 1835, Neal was influential. Portland produced no other novels than those of Mrs. Wood and John Neal, unless we count Longfellow's essay into Richterian romance, *Hyperion* (1839), but it did have a spate of tales—sentimental, moralistic, and fanciful. Among these, the most important single volume of tales was that of Neal’s friend Grenville Mellen, issued in the same year as *Rachel Dyer*. This volume, *Sad Tales and Glad Tales* by Reginald Reverie (Boston, 1828), indicated the general trends that Portland writers were to take in fiction. In the very use of a pseudonym, Mellen betrayed the extent of the hold Washington Irving yet had on him and others of his group, such as Nathaniel Deering and Longfellow. The tales themselves fall into three groups: historical, political, and fanciful; and these were to be, with the exception of genre stories, the most important types produced in Portland.

First in Mellen's volume, "The Palisadoes," a story which had appeared previously in N. P. Willis’s *Legendary* (1828), was a sentimental tale of the Hudson river during the American Revolution, and was accompanied by a second story of the same period and locale, "The Spy and the Traitor," which presented André as an unfortunate gentleman, a youth ruined by association with the villainous Arnold, who, "long since surrendered . . . to the sway of his passions," reached his just end when "he sunk [sic] in silence to his pillow, and died, an old man, in the stillness of his chamber." The two stories are linked by Mellen's narrator who reveals himself as the "Deathless Dutchman," a variant of the wandering Jew who intrigued the imagination of romantic writers. In subject, Mellen's historical tales suggest the influence of Neal's

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27. For a good discussion of the tales, see Lease, *That Wild Fellow John Neal*.
'Seventy-Six,' which had appeared five years previously and in which Arnold made a brief and ignoble appearance. In the next decade, S. B. Beckett was to fictionalize privateering (showing the influence of Cooper), and Ann Stephens was to carry historical romance out of the country in ‘‘The House of York’’ and ‘‘Sir Henry’s Daughter’’ (both in the Portland Magazine, 1834).

The second type of Mellen’s stories is illustrated by ‘‘The Presidency of the Republic in 1825, argued by the gods, and settled by Jove, in the supreme council chamber of Olympus,’’ a fanciful commentary on the disputed election of Adams, in which Mellen pokes fun at the Democrats. The author’s conservative politics are revealed in satire as Clodhopper rises to attack Adams for having been too much abroad and being therefore unfit to rule a republic. The form in which Mellen casts his satire, a letter from Reginald Reverie to Die Mihi, foreshadows the political Jack Downing letters that Seba Smith was to start in 1830.

The final selection in Sad Tales and Glad Tales is a badly organized ‘‘Tale of an Aeronaut’’ that has elements of satire, fancy, and moralizing. The best parts are those in which Mellen lets his imagination play with the possibilities of flight, an idea that was beginning to intrigue a few writers.‘‘ Mellen’s balloon shoots aloft to the sound of air rushing by like waves, and soon the hero, Gilbert Gas, is involved in a series of episodes prophetic of the air age. He observes ‘‘lunar rockets’’ (comets) zooming past, makes an overnight trip from New York to Europe, acts as an observer at the battle of Waterloo, and takes part in a sea-air rescue attempt as he hovers over a foundering ship. Underlying the fantasy is Mellen’s serious attack upon American absorption in ‘‘navigation, tonnage, and gain’’ to the detriment of the arts. In a conversation with Gilbert Gas, the Moon reveals her plans to dry up the harbors and force America to ‘‘cultivate letters instead of tobacco’’ so that she may see ‘‘science out-sailing . . . ships—poets on salaries—and authors, gentlemen at large.’’ Whimsy this may be, but whimsy felt personally by the struggling writer. His charge is the same as that of others (Neal, Longfellow, Emerson), but his mode of presentation is his own; he fears that ‘‘we shall find, when it is too late, that moonshine is an ingredient of vital importance in the constitution, and a political attribute to the highest rank.’’

Another dealer in ‘‘moonshine,’’ and a ‘‘gentleman at large’’ to boot, was Nathaniel Deering, who, in returning to Portland from Skowhegan in 1836, was stimulated by the local group to contribute to the journals items midway between essays and tales. His ‘‘Mrs. Sykes, from the papers of Dr. Tonic’’ came out in the Maine Monthly Magazine (July,
1836) and was reprinted the same year in the *Portland Sketch Book*. The humor is a scholarly sort, deriving from the pedantic grandiloquence of Dr. Tonic as it is punctured by the Yankee forthrightness of Sam. Clever mistranslations of Latin tags add their share to the fun and remain one of Deering’s chief sources of humor in his later work. In 1837 he contributed piquant and exaggerated tales of down-east life to the Portland *Orion* and *Transcript*; and in 1839, when many friends had migrated south, he contributed “Timotheus Tuttle” to Mellen’s short-lived New York journal *Colman’s Miscellany*, and “Tableaux Vivantes Down East” to the *Knickerbocker* (March, 1839). Many of these tales are laid in Tabbyville, a fictionalized Skowhegan, where local social customs are exaggerated out of recognition. In type, the tales belong to the genre of Yankee writing, as it had been developed on the stage, in novels (cf. Neal’s *The Down-Easters*), and in the journals, notably by Seba Smith and his Downingville characters.

Portland readers were by the 1830’s discovering the rich literary lode of their local scene as it had been suggested to them by Mrs. Wood in *Dorval* and the *Tales of the Night* and by John Neal in several of his novels. From Ann Stephens with her tale of “Jockey Cap” (at Fryeburg, Maine) and her inclusion of the local negro hack driver, Alek, in her “Romance and Reality,” to lawyer William L. McClintock, whose humorous Yankee “Courtship” was included in the *Portland Sketch Book*, and Longfellow, whose “Wondrous Tale of a Little Man in Gosling Green” thinly cloaked Brunswick scenes under the name of Bunganuck (itself a name for a peninsula south of Brunswick), the Portlanders brought their own area into fiction. But these were no early local colorists; each writer exploited the Yankee resources in his own way and for his own purposes: Deering, for humor; Smith, for political satire; Stephens, for background to sentimental plots; Longfellow, as a point of departure for a tale à la Richter.

As the period was drawing to a close in the mid-thirties, there was no dearth of fiction. In fact, the contents of the *Portland Magazine* (1834-36) and *Portland Sketch Book* (1836) testify that there were more writers in the town than at any previous time, but they were writing tales, not novels. The many journals, annuals, and literary magazines that flourished after the late twenties, exerted a pressure for shorter units of fiction, and the Portland group of writers, no longer innovators like Neal, were happy to cast their material into the most marketable form. The sentimental elements that had dominated the work of Mrs.

31. This tale was also reprinted by the Seba Smiths in their *Rover* in 1843.
32. See the fine study of Smith in Mary Alice Wyman’s *Two American Pioneers* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1927).
Wood were still present, particularly in the tales of Ann Stephens, but gothicism had, except in the work of Neal, all but disappeared. One new type of writing had come in with the Sunday School movement of the late 1820's when we find Portland publishers bringing out a number of moral tales for children. Such anonymous juvenile stories as the "Narrative of . . . Catherine Haldane" (Portland, 1828) and "Bracklyn Swamp" (Portland, 1836) were very probably the work of Portland writers, and some fiction was used by the Sabbath School Instructor after 1830. We recall that Elijah Kellogg grew up in Portland and that his Elm Island stories for boys sometimes took in Portland scenes (e.g., A Strong Arm). Likewise the Abbott brothers 36 were for a time in the Portland area. It is hardly accidental that these juvenile writers of the next generation had a common contact with Portland.

But the most significant change was from gothicism to regionalism. The work of Mrs. Wood and John Neal in demanding American fiction with true American scenes had borne fruit. The bulk of the fiction of the 1830's drew upon the American scene and most often on the local down-east territory of Maine. Furthermore, Mrs. Wood's excessive love of social decorum, clashing with Neal's energetic pursuit of social reform, had provided a stimulating combination for the younger writers. Elizabeth Oakes Smith and Ann Stephens were to be disciples of Neal, while too many (we feel today) were, like Mrs. Wood, to be content with the status quo of social amenities.

The trends of fiction as represented by Portland writers parallel those of the nation at large and confirm generally held views. The microcosm was typical of the larger world. And typically of the age, this study of fiction begins with a lady and ends with the ladies just mentioned. Women were the chief consumers of fiction and it is fitting that they should be supplied by their own sex. Grenville Mellen's ambition is revelatory; he would rest content if his volume of tales reached that nadir of success—a lady's boudoir. 37

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36. Jacob Abbott (1803-1879), author of the Rollo books, taught Longfellow at the Portland Academy, 1820-1821.
37. See "Preface" of Sad Tales and Glad Tales, and manuscript, "Some Account of my Children" (at the Maine Historical Society), where he writes of Sad Tales and Glad Tales, "The work, on the whole, has found its way to some boudoirs—and is thumbed in the libraries. Sais est."
Appendix

List of Maine fiction writers and works mentioned:

Jacob Abbott (1803–1879)
- Little Rollo books (1834ff.)
Nathaniel Deering (1791–1881)
- Tabbyville Tales (1837ff.)
Elijah Kellogg (1813–1901)
- Elm Island stories
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)
  - Hyperion (1839)
William L. McClintock
  - "Courtship" (1826)
Grenville Mellen (1799–1841)
  - Sad Tales and Glad Tales (1828)
John Neal (1793–1876)
  - Authorship (1830)
  - Brother Jonathan (1825)
  - The Down-Easters (1833)
  - Errata (1823)
Keep Cool (1817)
Logan, A Family History (1822)
Rachel Dyer (1828)
Randolph (1823)
'Seventy-Six (1823)
Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806–1893)
Seba Smith (1792–1868)
  - Jack Downing stories
Ann Stephens (1813–1886)
  - "Jockey Cap" (1835)
  - "Romance and Reality" (1834)
Sally Wood (1759–1855)
  - Amelia (1802)
  - Dorval (1801)
  - Ferdinand and Elmira (1804)
  - Julia, and the Illuminated Baron (1800)
  - Tales of the Night (1827)