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Book Reviews

Elwood Watson Ph.D.
East Tennessee State University

Richard Condon
University of Maine Farmington

Walter Sargent
University of Maine Farmington

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BOOK REVIEWS

Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950. By Maureen Elgersman Lee (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005. Pp. xxii + 177. Paper. \$22.00.)

The topic of African Americans in the state of Maine is one that garners occasional, yet sporadic interest. More than often, whenever it does, it is usually a discussion about the dearth of African Americans who reside in the state. This fact in and of itself is true. In fact, Maine usually vies with Vermont as the whitest state in America. This is not to say that the state has no African Americans in its history. A few became prominent citizens, among them Louis Sloknik and Milton Geary, prominent Lewiston and Bangor attorneys; John Jenkins and William Burney, former mayors of Lewiston and Augusta respectively; and the Talbot and Dymond families, which have had long roots in Bangor. Nevertheless, the subject of Blacks in Maine and New England in general is explored only in a few books and articles. Maureen Elgersman Lee's book on Bangor is a splendid and necessary addition to this list.

Given the limited primary resources available, Lee does an excellent job of reconstructing Black history in Bangor, making great use of city directories, probate records, newspaper articles (particularly the *Bangor Daily News*), photography, and interviews of prominent African American citizens. By examining similarities as well as distinctions between Black Bangor and other African-American communities in New England, Lee provides a holistic account of the Black experience. The stories are varied and complex.

The first three chapters explore the background of Blacks who settled in the town, the occupations they took, and their lives in general. A number arrived as part of the Great Migration from the South in the early twentieth century, while others moved from the South to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and other Canadian provinces and then to Maine, and still others came from Cape Verde and other Caribbean islands. A few were from Africa. Like Blacks in other parts of the nation, they were not immune from discrimination, no matter how subtle. Because of this, many were relegated to jobs as domestics, janitors, porters, factory workers, and other menial and subservient positions. Some were fortunate enough to secure positions as managers and clerks, while oth-

ers became school teachers or joined the art and music scene of the city. A precious few were attorneys and physicians.

Lee describes Bangor as a city where Blacks went to work, lived in close proximity to one another, and celebrated holidays. Women hung out in beauty parlors and shared recipes, while men caught up with one another in barbershops. People married, and once in a great while got divorced. Bangor's Blacks lived as normal a life as possible. Despite the limitations in documentation, Lee does an impressive job at providing the reader with a colorful interpretive analysis of city life.

In the last chapter — and the most significant — Lee looks at the institutions and civic life that Blacks forged in Bangor, and compares this to other Black communities in the region. She describes religion and worship, higher and postsecondary education, the military, women's clubs, social clubs and nightlife, fraternal and civic organizations, civil rights groups, and other organizational forces that were integral to Black life in the city.

Lee does a wonderful job connecting this picture of life to present-day New England. Her definitive, detailed study gives the reader a variety of opportunities to draw conclusions about life in a Black community situated in an overwhelmingly white state. She describes the gradual increase in the African-American population at the turn of the century, the period of demographic stabilization in the mid twentieth century, and the decline after World War II, and traces these trends in fascinating detail. Moreover, her research methods should serve as a model for others hoping to reconstruct similar groups in other Maine towns and cities.

With a wealth of detail and specification, Lee's book is a valuable historical, as well as anthropological, resource in helping us augment our knowledge of African Americans in Maine and New England.

ELWOOD WATSON, PH.D.

*Department of History
East Tennessee State University*

Through a Howling Wilderness: Benedict Arnold's March to Quebec, 1775.
By Thomas A Desjardin. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006. Pp. 240.
Cloth. \$24.95.)

Arnold's march to Quebec became familiar to many through Kenneth Roberts' 1930 novel, *Arundel*, and his collection of the participants' journals, *March to Quebec*. Desjardin relies heavily on the latter volume,

which saved him “endless correspondence and travel.” But he uses the narratives critically and supplements them with many other documents from American, Canadian, and British sources. Governor Carleton’s letters from Quebec to the Colonial Office and the manuscript journal of an anonymous resident of the city during 1775-1776 proved especially helpful.

Desjardin artfully tells the soldiers’ story, opening with one of them, Simon Fobes, returning to his father’s house in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, on a September day in 1776. In the eighteen months since he enlisted, he had “watched men around him die of hypothermia, drowning, and drunken violence . . . to survive, men ate dogs, shoes, clothing, leather, cartridge boxes, shaving soap, tree sap, and lip salve. If they survived, they suffered from gout, rheumatism, dysentery, angina, distemper, diarrhea, constipation, swollen limbs, and infestation.”

In Desjardin’s final paragraphs, Fobes reappears: captured during the doomed assault on the fortress city on December 31, 1775, he had been held in a virtual dungeon with little to eat, surrounded by companions dying of smallpox. Agreeing to serve as a deck-hand on a British warship in the St. Lawrence, he and two others had escaped and slowly made their way home.

In eleven concise and fast-moving chapters, Desjardin takes the Arnold expedition from dream to defeat, and finally to a kind of redemption. Excellent introductory sections explain why the rebels wanted what they optimistically called the “Fourteenth Colony,” introduce us to the story’s protagonists, Sir Guy Carleton and Col. Benedict Arnold, and describe the planning, recruitment of troops, and preparations for the twin moves on Quebec. (The other expedition, led by Gen. Richard Montgomery up the Champlain-Richelieu corridor to the capture of Montreal and eventual junction with Arnold’s force, enters the narrative toward the end.)

The next three chapters follow the scouting party Arnold sent out and bring the men through their first month in Maine to the Dead River and the beginning of the disasters which buffeted them. Days of heavy rain, followed by flooding and early snowfalls, made the going nearly impossible. Food was already running short, and Col. Enos, with about 450 men (half the total) abandoned the march. The next ten days, as they toiled over the snow-covered Height of Land and through the dreadful marshes around Spider Lake — freezing, sick, starving, and nearly naked — were the worst of all.

When they finally began to struggle into the French settlement along the Chaudiere River, the friendly *habitants* fed them and tended

the sick. The survivors reached Levis on November 8, the fifty-first day since they had sailed from Newburyport.

Most of them crossed the river to the Plains of Abraham west of the city walls and then waited for Montgomery as conditions and morale deteriorated. Many soldiers intended to leave when their enlistments ran out at the end of the year. During this delay, the defenders prepared and grew in numbers.

When Arnold and Montgomery finally made their move, everything that could go wrong did, including Montgomery's death and a severe wound to Arnold near the start. Desjardin clearly sorts out the complex details, aided by an excellent map. (He also did the maps.)

An epilogue briefly summarizes the later careers of many of the leaders and some of the followers on each side, but he concentrates on Arnold. Despite his wound, the colonel rallied the shattered American remnant and delayed Carleton's march south along Montgomery's former route during the summer and fall of 1776, buying precious time for the rebels to build up defenses, raise troops, and buy supplies. His victory over Burgoyne a year later at Saratoga brought France's indispensable help and gave independence a real chance.

Desjardin argues convincingly that the failure at Quebec "probably played a significant role in helping the colonies gain independence." Had Arnold taken Quebec, Burgoyne's seven thousand troops that surrendered at Saratoga would not have been able to land there and march to their eventual fate. These reinforcements might instead have gone to Boston or New York, with serious consequences for the rebel side.

Through a Howling Wilderness is a fast-moving story of clearly realized characters. Desjardin sets their struggle in a wide context and reveals its importance to the whole revolutionary epic.

RICHARD CONDON

Professor Emeritus

University of Maine Farmington

Marsden Hartley: Race, Region and Nation. By Donna M. Cassidy. (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005. Pp. 395. Cloth. \$ 39.95.)

Born in Lewiston of English immigrant parents in 1877, Marsden Hartley left Maine in his twenties to paint in France, Germany (where he

made five visits between 1910 and 1934), Mexico, New Mexico, and New York City. Although he sometimes returned to Maine to paint in early twentieth century summers, he largely renounced New England for two decades after 1910. Despite urging from friends to return to his roots, as late as 1930 he wrote that “I shall be happy enough to get out of New England never to enter it again.”

Seven years later, he came back to Maine to stay, marketing himself as “the painter from Maine.” Cassidy, who touches very lightly on his earlier career, points out that during the Depression decade, American culture broke with European roots and models, so that midwestern regionalist painters like Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood enjoyed success. But Hartley, unable to sell any of his work, was living on sixty cents a day in the winter of 1934-1935. Then, after a visit to Gloucester, and Nova Scotia in 1936, he exhibited paintings acclaimed by critics and public.

Hartley realized that regionalist art sold, and that New England, including Maine, was a popular brand. Painters of the older generation like Albert Pinkham Ryder and Winslow Homer (both much admired by Hartley) and younger men like John Marin, as well as the poets Robert Frost and Robert P. T. Coffin, proved it. (Cassidy could also have mentioned the extremely popular Maine transplant novelist Kenneth Roberts.) Even the new magazine *Yankee*, for which Hartley sometimes wrote, revealed the trend.

The “painter from Maine” saw a mythic Maine, with its rugged coast and mountains peopled by a vital and manly race. He painted the tourists’ Maine: lighthouses, beaches, hunters, lobstermen, little white churches, and – above all – Mount Katahdin. These paintings sold, and Hartley thrived: “Mount Katahdin – Autumn # 2”, from 1939-1940 hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as does “Lobster Fisherman.” Other paintings of Maine scenes from his last period were purchased by the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and many others.

A “modernist” painter, Hartley (and others like him, Cassidy says) turned nostalgically to past traditions. He collected historical artifacts, visited museums (especially the Peabody in Salem, Massachusetts, for its depictions of old sailing ships), enjoyed historic houses such as the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and the Nordica Homestead in Farmington, Maine, and made a hero of President Lincoln. Above all, he saw in Maine an “ideal, anti-modern world” and “longed for a golden age” like that of pre-industrial New England. Katahdin itself he associated with

ancient geology and with an earlier visit there by his soul-mate Henry David Thoreau.

Believing that New England had declined much from its “flowering” period a century before, Hartley hoped it would revive. That, he thought, would come from the “folk,” the “pure Yankee race,” “natural men, working nature, conquering nature.” Before his return to Maine, he had idealized the young German rural peasants he had seen there on his last visit in 1933-1934. This was also the first year of the Hitler era. Hartley admired the Fuhrer’s “fresh feeling in idealism and national piety” and wanted to meet him but he never did. Cassidy tells us that his opinions later changed. She argues that he “was not a Nazi ideal or a vocal fascist supporter.” However, he certainly held the widespread racialist feelings of his time, especially in reference to Mexicans and African-Americans.

Hartley, Cassidy says, was “in many ways no longer a Mainer and certainly not a working class native or one of the folk, even though he often presented (or imagined) himself as one. Despite the fact that he struggled financially throughout his career, he was a member of the elite.” Even more fundamentally, by 1942, five years into his “painter from Maine” period, he wrote, “I cannot sit around the rocks, fine as they are, and watch fifty foot waves dash up and then fall – I want to be where there is more a sense of the present picture of life.”

Cassidy portrays a complex and difficult man’s last half-dozen years of success, and his very mixed feelings about his native state. Her book is profusely illustrated with black and white figures and a generous selection of well-produced color plates. She includes seven essays by Hartley himself. Forty-five pages of notes and eighteen pages of bibliography, including many archival sources, attest to Cassidy’s scholarship.

RICHARD CONDON

Professor Emeritus

University of Maine Farmington

Saints and Strangers: New England in British North America. By Joseph A. Conforti. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Pp. xi-x +236. Paper. \$19.95.)

Professor Joseph Conforti announces the purpose of this volume in his first sentence: to examine “New England as a region within the

British North America" (p. ix). Conforti elaborates in his prologue that developments in the Puritan colonies produced a distinct region and regional identity within the expanding British empire in North America, ironically "not an insular city upon a hill" (p. 3). Conforti's goal is to supplant the teleological tendency to read Puritan New England as a precursor of the American experience with a fresh perspective of New England in its broader British colonial and transatlantic context. As the title suggests, compared to other Puritan studies by the likes of Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan, and Robert Middlekauff, or the namesake volume by George Willison, Conforti takes a more comprehensive approach to the actors in New England by including non-Puritans, Native Americans, and Africans.

The six chapters in *Saints and Strangers* blend chronological and topical treatment of developments in the New England region. Conforti begins with the transformative experience of Native New England during the early phase of English colonization. Employing material culture to inform his analysis, Conforti notes that European tools, weapons, and alcohol fueled a "Native 'arms race'" and "wracked Indian villages" (pp. 18-19). Conflicts became decidedly more deadly for Native people, and Native spiritualism, robust and pervasive as it was, was ineffective against the rolling tides of European pathogens. The result was dramatically reduced Native populations, but they did not simply disappear as the myth of the "vanishing Indian" supposes. Rather, they persisted as an integral element of the emerging Euro-American New England.

Chapters Two through Four cover seventeenth-century developments. Conforti points out that the early settlements "did not resemble the compact, orderly, white villages" of popular imagination, but were actually dispersed patterns of settlement (pp. 51-51). Likewise, he sees economic opportunity as a more important motivation for settlement than religious differences. The Puritan contingent was also more disputatious than harmonious. For example, disputes over ministers belie the notion of a peaceable kingdom in New England (p. 60). As to the "Strangers," Conforti emphasizes that New England settlements were on a "maritime frontier" that linked them to a variety of non-Puritan groups from the West Indies to Catholic Europe. Puritans also relied on non-Puritan artisans and servants within their communities, and the maritime settlements of fishermen meant the presence of "valuable but troublesome strangers" in the northern reaches of New England (p. 77). In this heterogeneous environ and amidst the realization of the failure of the Puritan revolution in England, second-generation Puritans formulated their own regional identity as a Bible commonwealth with at least

one foot in the West Indies trade that gradually transformed Puritans into “Yankees.”

In Chapters Five and Six, Conforti’s narrative carries the story into the eighteenth century. As the population grew exponentially through natural increase, the ethnicity of New England remained predominantly English, in contrast to the middle colonies that received an influx of German, Scots-Irish, and other non-English immigrants and the Southern colonies that received significant numbers of enslaved Africans. Though ethnic and cultural homogeneity distinguished New England from other regions, the ascendance of a commercial society and its attendant social ills did not. Poverty, stresses on family structures, unabated pressures on Native peoples, and active involvement in the slave trade all reflected integration into the shared experiences of British North American colonies. Conforti’s final chapter describes the process of “re-anglicizing” the regional identity of New England in mid-century, shown, for example, in the widespread enthusiasm for tea drinking and all things English. Pride in the tenets of English liberty and the success of English arms in the imperial wars for North America seemingly made New Englanders more English than ever. However, the antiauthoritarian character of the fractious religious scene in America converged with changed economic and geopolitical imperial realities after 1763 to precipitate a rupture in the solidarity of empire, and Conforti concludes that New England’s regional identity was a casualty of the ensuing conflict, “necessitating a prolonged post-independence search for an American identity” (p. 205).

Conforti’s synthesis incorporates the findings from an enormous body of recent secondary literature as well as his own expertise in the fields of religious traditions and identity studies. The reformulation of colonial New England history in the inclusive rubric of regional identity offers a welcome overview of the current state of New England studies. The bibliographic essay that complements the clearly written narrative text will be of excellent service for students. All told, Conforti’s *Saints and Strangers* provides a valuable comprehensive introduction to colonial New England for undergraduate courses.

WALTER L. SARGENT
University of Maine Farmington