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Special Collections 1012: The Bastard by Erskine Caldwell

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS

BY WILLIAM DAVID BARRY

Special Collections 1012:
The Bastard, by Erskine Caldwell.
Gift of the Friends of the Collections.

THOUGH usually thought of as a major southern writer, Georgia's Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987), spent an important and productive part of his early career in Maine. Thanks to the sharp eyes of bookseller Nancy Grayson, the Maine Historical Society has acquired a copy of Caldwell's novella *The Bastard* (New York: Heron Press, Inc., 1929). The volume is important as the author's first book, one that was rented from Caldwell's Longfellow Square Bookshop Library in Portland, and because local copies were seized and banned by Cumberland County Attorney Ralph M. Ingalls (1890-1941).

Caldwell moved to Maine in 1925 after his marriage to Helen Lannigan. The couple lived in the Lannigan summer home at Mount Vernon. While writing fiction, Caldwell's income derived from reviewing books. By 1928 he had accumulated some 3,000 review copies and the couple hit on the idea of using them to stock a bookstore in Portland. Soon they rented a store at 668a Congress Street and a house in Cape Elizabeth.

Things began auspiciously at the Longfellow Square Bookshop, where patrons could buy books or rent them for twenty-five cents a day. Caldwell was also writing furiously. Early in 1929 he sold a short story to *Transition* magazine and in October Erich Posselt agreed to publish Caldwell's first short novel. The book follows a murderous sociopath on various adventures, and the publisher chose *The Bastard* as its title adding provocative illustrations by New York cartoonist Ty Mahon. During the 1929 Christmas season, the county attorney seized all the copies in the store and forbid sale of the book in Maine.

The author lashed out with a short story, "The Bogus Ones," and printed a broadside titled "In Defense of Myself." The latter attacks Ingalls for the "official suppression of the book in Portland without trial before a judge or before a jury." With declining inventory, and enthusiasm, the Caldwells closed up shop in the spring of 1930 and returned to Mount Vernon.

Other changes were occurring. The marriage was deteriorating and



The
BASTARD



ERSKINE CALDWELL.



Illustrations by
TY MAHON

New York
Heron Press Incorporated

Erskine was often away. After an extended trip to Georgia in 1931, the writer returned downeast to finish his most celebrated novel, *Tobacco Road* (Scribner's, 1932). He worked intermittently in Maine until 1936.

In 1990 Caldwell's *Midsummer Passion and Other Tales of Maine* was brought out by Yankee books, edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin Greenberg, and with an introduction by Upton Bonnie Brady. It anthologizes twenty of the writer's Maine short stories. At the end of his career, Caldwell enthusiastically promoted the work of Fred Bonnie (1945-2000), the superb Portland-born writer of "Real Maine" and "New South" fiction. Perhaps in Bonnie's short stories Caldwell saw something of his own career in geographic revenge.

Finally readers should turn to *Caldwell's With All My Might: An Autobiography* (Peachtree Publishers, 1987), in which the Maine years are discussed. *The Bastard* and the Maine stories emerge from a crucial time in the career of an influential American author, and inspires interesting discussions about the nature of regionalism.

