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The Writing of State Histories

The U.S. Bicentennial celebrations provided an opportunity for some Americans to ask a number of hard questions about the symbiotic relationship which connects their historical past with their perplexing contemporary present. For others, the celebrations were the means whereby an unquestioning, naive attachment to the "noble republican experiment" was strengthened by the shrill rhetoric of the advertising agencies and the desperate psychological need to believe in something — however irrelevant and mythical that something might actually be. A noteworthy result of the Bicentennial was the decision made by W.W. Norton and the American Association for State and Local History to publish a fifty-one volume series dealing with "every state, plus the District of Columbia". The General Editor of the series, James M. Smith, stressed to each author that they were not to write "comprehensive chronicles" or "research monographs". Rather they were to sum up — as Smith cogently expressed it in his "Invitation to the Reader", which introduces each of the volumes — what was "interpretive, sensitive, thoughtful, individual, even personal — of what seems significant about his or her state's history". In other words, each author was asked to write a personal, impressionistic study of a particular state. Scholarship was, in a very real sense, to be sacrificed to the gods of readibility, popularity and relevance.

Two of the three volumes about New England which are being reviewed in this essay certainly fit the general framework provided by Smith. Charles E. Clark's *Maine* (New York, 1977), and Elizabeth Forbes Morison's and Elting E. Morison's *New Hampshire* (New York, 1976) are both strong on impressions, feelings, ambience, unsupportable generalizations and surprisingly weak, especially the New Hampshire volume, on the basic contours of historical development. Richard D. Brown's *Massachusetts* (New York, 1978), on the other hand, contains a brilliantly conceived and cogently written overview of Massachusetts history. His volume not only makes excellent use of available scholarship but also attempts, in a sophisticated manner, to drill into the collective mind of his state. Brown's study should have served as a model for other studies. He has, on the whole, succeeded in the difficult task of walking the knife edge between good history and popular writing.

Professor Clark has attempted to write — as he puts it — a "history of Maine primarily as a state of mind" and as a collection "of the successive images that have made up a special people's sense of a special place" (p. 15). There is therefore considerable emphasis placed on what certain people have written about Maine — Captain John Smith in the early seventeenth century, the railway entrepreneur John Poor and the prohibitionist Neal Dow in the nineteenth century, and Sarah Orne Jewett, the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century writer. There is also an attempt made to link the "successive images"

with a somewhat flimsy chain of historical events such as the capture of Louisburg in 1745, the American Revolution, the creation of Maine as a separate state in 1820, the Civil War, and a potpourri of twentieth-century economic, social and political developments. The book concludes with a superficial discussion of some of the contemporary tensions existing between the conservationalists and those advocating economic growth — almost at any cost. Even though New Brunswick and Maine share a border, there is almost no mention made of the New Brunswick-Maine relationship. New Brunswick is not even included in the index. There is a brief discussion of the Aroostock War and of Machias and the American Revolution, but no attempt has been made to integrate into the study H.A. Davis' important *An International Community on the St. Croix 1604-1930* (Orono, 1950) and a number of other published and unpublished studies dealing with important aspects of the New Brunswick-Maine relationship. Though not of central importance in Maine history, the New Brunswick connection must be worthy of at least a page or two in a 200 page book.

The Morison study of *New Hampshire* is far less satisfactory both in a scholarly and literary sense than the Clark volume. The research base is disconcertingly shallow and narrow and there has been no serious attempt to push the parameters of knowledge much beyond the most elementary and obvious limits. The first half of the book is concerned with the pre-1787 period and the authors go little beyond Jeremy Belknap's *History of New Hampshire* (2 vols., Boston, 1791, 1792). The second half of the book tries to deal with nineteenth- and twentieth-century social, political and economic development in the state. The twentieth-century section is especially disjointed, opaque and superficial. Assertion becomes proof and broad generalizations are often based upon individual experience or an isolated comment. This is, even taking into account the paradigm of the General Editor, a disappointing and flawed volume.

Brown's *Massachusetts*, on the other hand, was both a joy and a relief to read. It is, in my view, the best one-volume study available of any New England state. Brown confidently moves from John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" to the "Great Awakening", to the American Revolution, to the 'Industrial Revolution', to the "Civil War", and then to an outstanding discussion of what he calls the "Missions to the Nation". According to Brown, the nineteenth-century Massachusetts humanitarian concern for abolitionism, temperance reform, the plight of the mentally ill and those in prison, was the natural outgrowth of the Great Awakening. But at precisely the same time these reform missionaries were proselitizing the nation, their state was becoming the "center for capitalist ideology" (p. 190), while the old New England collective ideal was being undermined by class and ethnic tensions. Gradually, therefore, as the nineteenth century unfolded "the importance of state and locality paled in comparison to class and nation" (p. 186).

Brown's *Massachusetts* contains many perceptive insights. It is written in an

engaging style and it provides a model for other state and provincial studies. It also implicitly conveys a warning to the scholar. State and provincial histories aimed at a general and a professional audience are extremely difficult books to write.

G.A. RAWLYK

Recent Publications in Local History: New Brunswick*

In recent years a whole series of important books dealing with the history of New Brunswick have been republished. Among the most valuable is William Francis Ganong's *Ste. Croix (Dochet) Island* (Saint John, New Brunswick Museum, 1979), a republication of the 1945 revised edition of a monograph first published in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada for 1902-03*. Dr. Ganong describes the early history of French settlement in Acadia in great detail and includes long quotations from the sources. While most of this material comes from Champlain's account, which has been published elsewhere,[1] it is material which is not easily accessible to the general reader. Ganong also discusses Ste. Croix Island in the period after the departure of deMonts and Champlain as well as the part the island played in the boundary controversies of 1796-99, and concludes with a short section on its more recent history. A second useful publication of the New Brunswick Museum is a new edition of John Clarence Webster's *Acadia at the End of the Seventeenth Century* (Saint John, 1979). Originally published in 1934, the book consists chiefly of the letters, journals and memoirs of Joseph Robineau de Villebon, Commandant in Acadia 1690-1700. There is a useful chapter on source materials and biographical sketches of all the important figures mentioned in the text. The book contains information on the Acadian settlements on the Saint John river, descriptions of Fort Ste. Joseph and its construction, and details of the expeditions organized to raid New England settlements, many of which were planned by Governor Villebon from Fort Ste. Joseph. The journals also contain information about Indian-French relations and the role of the missionaries among the Indians. This is an invaluable book for anyone interested in Indian-white relations or Anglo-French rivalry in the late seventeenth century, since much of the material is not available elsewhere, at least not in English.

Another valuable reprint is Walter Bates, *Kingston and the Loyalists of the*

* This review article is the first of a new series examining recent publications in local history. Each of the Atlantic Provinces will be dealt with in turn and the series will be a continuing one, although there may not be a similar article in every issue of the journal. Some of the more important books mentioned in these bibliographical essays may also be reviewed separately. — Editor's Note.

1 Samuel de Champlain, *Works*, ed. H.R. Biggar (6 vols., Toronto, The Champlain Society, 1922-36.)