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BOOK REVIEWS



The Untold Story of Champ: A Social History of America's Loch Ness Monster

By Robert E. Bartholomew (Albany, N.Y.: Excelsior Editions, State University of New York Press, 2012, pp. 253, \$24.95).

In July 1819, the *Plattsburg Republican* reported that a Captain Crum had been boating off Port Henry, New York, when he saw, 200 yards ahead:

a monster rearing its head more than fifteen feet, and moving with the utmost velocity to the south . . . which he described to be 187 feet long, its head flat with three teeth, two in the center and one in the upper jaw . . . color black with a star in the forehead and a belt of red around the neck—its body about the size of a hogshead with hunches on the back about as large as a common potash barrel—the eyes large and the color of a peeled [sic] onion (p. 13).

Captain Crum's vivid description filled in many details that had been missing from the first recorded account of a Champlain sea serpent in 1808, which said simply, "Lake Champlain—A monster has lately made its appearance on the waters of the lake" (p. 12). Perhaps that observer did not have the astounding visual acuity of Captain Crum, who seems to have been able to discern an exact length of 187 feet for a creature 200 yards away. So began over two hundred years of sightings of the Americas' greatest aquatic mystery, Champ.

The Untold Story of Champ starts with the perennial question, does Champ actually exist? Sociologist Robert E. Bartholomew has taken on the daunting, occasionally thankless, task of systematically examining

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the historical and scientific evidence for the existence of a large sea creature in Lake Champlain. “Champie,” as many passionate advocates call it, excites strong feelings on a par with those of believers in the Sasquatch (Bigfoot), UFOs, and alien visitors to earth. Champ research is a minefield that any academic enters at his or her peril.

Bartholomew provides a thorough, often fascinating, overview of the historical record, debunking myths along the way. The old saw that Samuel de Champlain was the first white man to see Champ is exposed as sloppy reporting in a 1970 *Vermont Life* article by Marjorie Lansing Porter that was then repeatedly cited as fact. Champlain’s journal accurately described a large garfish, not a sea monster. Beginning with the 1808 account, the nineteenth-century sightings had an awesome and fantastic quality about them. The New York side of the lake experienced a great “serpent scare” in 1873, when, after a series of sightings of a frightening creature, “Animals began disappearing, prompting alarm that the sea serpent was snatching them” (p. 20). Additional farm animals went missing amidst widespread public hysteria. Accounts of this threatening creature were picked up by the national press, leading P.T. Barnum to offer \$50,000 for the monster, dead or alive. Then as now, there were skeptics, such as the *Rutland Herald* writer who wrote that the New York “accounts of this ‘sarpint’ are sad comments on the terrible alcoholic substance that is in vogue on the banks of Lake Champlain” (p. 27).

By the early twentieth century, Champ had lost its supernatural qualities and sightings confined it to the waters of the lake. Descriptions, which had varied in the earlier period, now began to conform to the creature described in the Porter article, with its horse-shaped head, khaki green color, and humped back. In the 1970s dozens of sightings were reported and articles appeared in the national press. Champ, whose fame had been eclipsed by the upstart Loch Ness monster (first reported seen in 1933!), seemed to be making its play for international renown.

Champ fever picked up steam with the publication of Sandra Mansi’s famous 1977 photo, purporting to show the long neck of what looked to be a modern-day plesiosaur rearing up from the waters of Lake Champlain. It is here that this book takes a strange turn. Bartholomew has heretofore presented a clear, well-researched account of the long historical record of Champ sightings; but with the publication of the Mansi photo, all manner of Champ researchers, fanatics, and cryptozoology researchers enter the picture. While serious scientists examined the phenomenon, particularly in the Lake Champlain Committee’s academic conference on the subject in 1981, Champ studies also attracted a small but vocal number of self-styled experts intent on being the first to prove

that Champ exists. Once the author has to deal with these living people, many of whom he seems to know very well, the narrative goes astray.

While the Champ glory hounds are a vital, and often amusing, part of the story, Bartholomew relates their petty feuds and infighting with a level of detail that only the participants could find interesting. In the process, he exposes his own hobbyhorses. He is livid that people have repeated Porter's Samuel de Champlain myth, angry that struggling towns like Port Henry should try to make a buck on the Champ craze, and too willing to treat cryptozoology as if it were a recognized academic field. He is particularly eager to debunk the Mansi photo, a subject that he belabors for many pages when one or two would do the job handily. Some of this information is priceless. Who would be able to leave out Champ hunter Dennis Jay Hall's undocumented assertion that "the Indians once routinely dined on Champ" (p. 137)? But the author teeters on the edge of becoming too much a part of his story.

Bartholomew's book might have benefited from a stronger grasp of folklore, which has a lot to offer here, and more skepticism about pseudoscience. Yet in the final analysis he must be commended for pulling it all together and providing a final chapter that neatly sums up the main theories of whether Champ exists and what it might be. Is Champ a prehistoric creature, like the coelacanth discovered off South Africa in 1938, previously thought to have been extinct for 60 million years? If so, an alert reader might ask, why have we never found a carcass in two hundred years of looking? Is it a giant snake, or an Atlantic sturgeon, or a garfish? Is it an optical illusion—wave patterns, or flocks of birds, or mammals in the water—that can look like a sea serpent if the light is just right? Is it a trick played by the imagination, because we want it to exist, turning the old adage on its head into "believing is seeing" (p. 196)? In the end, Bartholomew's well-researched and lively look at all aspects of the Champ phenomenon leads to a surprisingly sensible conclusion. So, does Champ exist? You'll have to read the book.

JAN ALBERS

Jan Albers has a doctorate in history from Yale University and is a frequent speaker, museum consultant, and writer on Vermont topics, as well as the author of Hands on the Land: A History of the Vermont Landscape (2000).

*Something Abides: Discovering the Civil War
in Today's Vermont*

By Howard Coffin (Woodstock, Vt.: The Countryman Press, 2013,
pp. 528, \$35.00)

Howard Coffin's new book is part driving directions, part close-up local history, and part heartbreak. The author takes the reader mile by mile through the geographic, social, and economic imprint of the Civil War on Vermont. It's a large catalogue, and the book is structured alphabetically by county, then alphabetically by towns within each county, making a specific place easy to find. This is a courtesy to the reader but also a tool for the author, since it supports a level of detail that is nearly encyclopedic.

"Six miles north of Lyndonville on Route 122," Coffin writes, "the Wheelock town hall faces a small green in the village of Wheelock, known as Wheelock Hollow during the Civil War. There stands the town Civil War memorial with the names of 86 Wheelock men who served from an 1860 population of 845" (p. 137). A few paragraphs later, we also learn that the town approved war expenses that totaled \$25,584.51, and these numbers only begin to describe the true cost of the war to the people in the small towns and villages across the state. *Something Abides* is about data, and the data are impressive, but the book reaches higher. After the fall of Fort Sumter, the women of Wheelock came together to make a national flag that reflected a shared hope: "Although the ruthless hand of secession had sought to efface eleven stars, . . . in faith they placed 'a star for every state' with the fervent prayer that in God's good time there would be a state for every star" (p. 138).

This example from Wheelock was selected at random, since every town is chronicled with equally close attention, and the cumulative impact brings a new urgency to events and personal tragedies from a hundred and fifty years ago. As we follow Coffin along the back roads and past the houses of soldiers—some of them now cellar holes or stands of lilacs—we begin to understand not just what happened to Vermonters during the war, but the depth of their sacrifice. As historian and Pulitzer Prize winner James M. McPherson points out in the foreword, Vermont was "at or near the top among Northern states in the percentage of men who served and the percentage of men of military age who lost their lives" (p. 11). Coffin visits their graves and even knows which graves are empty because the body never came home.

Funerals and cenotaphs aside, *Something Abides* is also a rich accounting of people, places, and money—this last item is something not often emphasized in Civil War histories, but it carries considerable weight here. Some of the amounts pledged to support the war seem themselves unsupportable when understood in the currency of the time: The “\$500 to \$1,500 each” (p. 456) that the town of Bridgewater was willing to pay to meet its recruitment quota translates from \$14,200 to about \$42,000 today; some towns seem to have taxed themselves well beyond the probable value of their own grand list. Specific events are highlighted, such as the death of John Brown and the procession of his body through Rutland and Addison counties, which brings that prelude to war, the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, into focus: A local boy in Panton could report that Brown’s coffin, “or the box containing it, had been badly cut up by souvenir hunters” (p. 58); and bells are tolled not just along the route to the ferry that will take Brown’s body back to North Elba, but in far-away Peacham, where Leonard Johnson pulled the bell rope for an hour, annoying at least some of the people within earshot. Johnson was fervent in his opposition to slavery and apparently used disrespectful, “unchurchful” language to denounce it; one result was that he was threatened with expulsion from his congregation and had to sign a formal apology. He could not resist appending to his apology the observation that he was “right on the anti-slavery question” (p. 120).

This level of detail is a delight to the general reader, but the book will also serve future researchers through its careful and extensive indexing. There are two: The first is a general index of places, buildings, organizations, and things; while the second index is dedicated only to names. This makes the sheer heft of the book, at more than 500 closely printed pages, more manageable, since everything in it can be located with remarkable ease. In this respect it has something in common with Esther Swift’s *Vermont Place-Names*, another valuable resource for people who want to understand the culture and the history of the state; and the two books share the organizational themes of county, town, and village in alphabetical order.

Coffin’s book opens with a useful overview of the history of Vermont during the Civil War and clarifies the progression of events, the forming of regiments, and the key leaders of the different brigades. This gives a helpful framework for all that follows by describing how troops were deployed and which battles and campaigns most affected Vermont soldiers and their families back home. This introductory narration really does help with understanding the cascade of local detail that follows, since it retells the story in a focused way.

Something Abides is inviting and intelligently organized, and the readership for this book is likely to be wide and enthusiastic—it will include local history buffs, genealogists, Civil War historians, and anyone who enjoys exploring the many revealing facts and events that give life and color to history.

HELEN HUSHER

Helen Husher is the author of three books about and set in Vermont. She lives in Montpelier.

Giant in the Shadows: The Life of Robert T. Lincoln

By Jason Emerson (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012, pp. 600, \$39.95).

Robert Todd Lincoln (1843–1926), the only child of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln who lived to adulthood, is portrayed in the 2012 movie *Lincoln* as a young man chafing as a law student at Harvard University and desiring to enter the U.S. Army in the waning months of the Civil War. He got his wish when he became an aide to General Grant at the end of the conflict. Lincoln then went on to a long and successful career as a corporate lawyer and public servant before building a mansion, Hildene, in Manchester, Vermont, where he spent much of the last two decades of his life.

Jason Emerson, an independent historian who has written extensively on the Lincoln family, presents a first-rate study of American political history and corporate life for the half-century after the Civil War. Robert Lincoln was an active participant in state and national politics throughout his long life and was prominent as a businessman and attorney in Chicago as the city grew into a major commercial and manufacturing center late in the nineteenth century. Emerson ably presents the reader with a careful study of corporate life in the United States between the early 1870s and World War I.

Emerson starts his lengthy study with a description of Robert's youth and his days at Harvard University during the early years of the Civil War. With the end of the conflict and the assassination of his father, he brought his mother and younger brother Tad to live in Chicago. Once there he finished his law degree and helped to establish a law firm. It was in Chicago where Robert made his mark as a very successful corporate lawyer and later as president of the Pullman Palace Car Company in 1897.

Robert Lincoln was asked on many occasions to stand as a candidate for a wide variety of state and federal offices, but he steadfastly refused to consider such an endeavor. His name was brought forward as a possible Republican vice presidential candidate in 1884 and as a presidential candidate in 1888; on both occasions, however, he explicitly forbade his name to be placed in nomination. But he did serve ably as secretary of war under Presidents Garfield and Arthur and as American ambassador to Great Britain during the administration of Benjamin Harrison. Emerson indicates that Robert Lincoln worked hard and was a superb administrator in both posts.

Lincoln's life and career were not without controversy, and Emerson devotes great detail to some of these problems. Lincoln served as general counsel for the Pullman Company during the bitter 1894 strike by workers, which ended in a victory for management. The company and Lincoln attracted broad criticism for their paternalistic policies and refusal to negotiate with the American Railway Union, representing the workers. Lincoln's work in defeating the workers, however, drew the gratitude of management, who gave him the post of company president three years later.

Emerson also provides great detail about Robert Lincoln's difficult task of committing his increasingly erratic mother to a luxurious mental institution in Illinois. Emerson's research indicates that Mrs. Lincoln was suffering from severe mental depression and insecurity. She was, for example, so afraid of losing her life savings that whenever she went out, she carried on her person thousands of dollars of negotiable bonds, which any mugger could have easily stolen from her. Emerson also portrays Lincoln's strong efforts to protect his father's legacy against what he judged as irresponsible or even sensational books and articles about the fallen president, and his role in preventing an attempt to steal his father's corpse from the Lincoln grave site in Illinois.

Lincoln on occasion visited Vermont between the mid-1860s and late 1890s and fell in love with the area around Manchester, where his law partner, Edward S. Isham, had a great estate, Ormsby Hill, near the town, and where the Ekwanok Country Club offered one of the finest golf courses he had ever seen. Lincoln bought 500 acres of land near Manchester after Isham's death in 1902 and hired the Boston architectural firm of Sheply, Rutan, and Coolidge to design what he would call his "ancestral home." Lincoln was in declining health and desperately wanted a tranquil place where he could rest with his family and where they could live after his death.

Construction began in 1904 on what became a magnificent set of buildings he would call Hildene. It is estimated that the main house and

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outbuildings cost \$63,500 to design and \$77,984 to construct—more than \$3 million today. He later added extensive outer gardens and in 1908 built an observatory on the property.

When Lincoln and his family moved into the mansion, he exclaimed with considerable joy that “I am now a Vermont farmer and beginning to enjoy life.” Indeed, he became a gentleman farmer, noting with pride, “My main business . . . is as a dairy farmer.” He boasted to an acquaintance, “I bought a 320-acre farm at Manchester and own 40 cows. The farmer makes about 100 pounds of butter a week. . . . Mrs. Lincoln is delighted.” But his main activity was golf, and his golfing partners included President William Howard Taft, who visited Hildene in 1912. Another prominent visitor to Hildene was former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George in 1923.

Lincoln died at Hildene in July 1926 and his funeral was held there two days later. He was subsequently buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

Robert Lincoln lived a very full, interesting, and influential life, and Emerson’s well-researched and well-written study brings his life to public attention. Emerson devotes much of the last quarter of the book to Lincoln’s life and activities in Vermont. We learn much about the life of wealthy residents and visitors to Vermont in the early years of the twentieth century. *Giant in the Shadows* is also a superb complementary study of the life and legacy of both Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln.

DANIEL A. MÉTRAUX

Daniel A. Métraux is professor of Asian Studies at Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia, and adjunct professor of history and culture, Graduate Program at the Union Institute and University. He is a summer resident of Greensboro, Vermont.

Norwich, Vermont: A History

By Norwich History Book Committee (Norwich, Vt.: Norwich Historical Society, 2012, pp. ix, 318, paper, \$29.99).

Despite the title, this is not a history of Norwich. It might better be called a Norwich Scrapbook for it is a collection of essays, photos, vignettes, lists, documents, and odds and ends. The book was written by a committee and is published in paperback with a Paul Sample painting of the Norwich swimming pool on the cover. The book is nine inches long by eleven inches wide, which makes it a little difficult to hold, but it

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is perfect for the coffee table, where it can be sampled and savored. Few will read it from cover to cover because it is made up of too many pieces and it lacks a strong narrative voice. It has a chronology of important events in the town's history that runs along the bottom of the pages, like CNN's "Breaking News," but the book is organized by topics, including geology, railroads, religion, education, civic life, police and fire departments, wars and veterans, cemeteries, the arts, and clubs and organizations. There are articles dealing with various aspects of Norwich's history and most of them have endnotes that may lead readers to other sources. And there is an index, though not all of the illustrations are included; but still it is useful for those who wish to browse.

The authors announce in the introduction that they were inspired by the 250th anniversary of the town's charter granted by Governor Benning Wentworth on July 4, 1761, and they see themselves as "resuming the project begun more than a hundred years ago by M. E. Goddard and Henry V. Partridge, who published a history of Norwich in 1905." This is probably a mistake, because a great deal has changed in the researching and writing of local history in the last hundred years. To be fair to the authors, they have not adopted the romantic and congratulatory tone of the town histories written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and, at least in some chapters, they are influenced by the recent trends in writing local history. In one chapter, "People of Norwich: We've Always Been a Multicultural Community," the authors make tentative use of the manuscript census and the agricultural census to describe life and trade in Norwich. They locate at least ten African Americans living in the town in 1830, and find a Native American presence as well.

Throughout the book we discover fascinating information about the town, though there is rarely an effort to compare Norwich to other Vermont or New Hampshire towns. Norwich's location on the Connecticut River and across from Hanover and Dartmouth College influences its development in many ways. There are accounts of log drives, ferries, bridges, and dams. In the early years, Dartmouth College controlled and profited from the lone ferry. In the twentieth century Norwich became a bedroom community for the larger towns and a place where Dartmouth professors lived. Among those who chose to live on the Vermont side of the river were historian Allen Foley, philosopher Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, and artist-in-residence Paul Sample. There is an interesting chapter on The American Literary, Scientific, and Military Academy, which became Norwich University and moved to Northfield, Vermont, after a disastrous fire in 1866. We learn that there was once a canning company and a chair manufacturer in Norwich, and there is much more.

The book has over 300 illustrations, many of them photographs, and because of the good quality of the paper, most of these photos are

reproduced clearly. The maps, however, are often small and difficult to read. The illustrations are one of the strengths of the book, but most have only one-line captions, and many cry out for more interpretation. There is a wonderful and revealing photograph on page 11, an 1890s overview of Norwich taken by Henry H. Barrett, the official Dartmouth College photographer, who lived in town. There are agricultural fields in the foreground and partly wooded hills in the background with excellent examples of Vermont connected farm architecture (the “big house, little house, backhouse, barn” of the nineteenth-century children’s playtime chant), and several farms that extend behind village streets. The relationship of village to farm is more obvious in this one photo than it is after several paragraphs of prose. Many other photos record clothing, material culture, and the built environment, but they deserve more interpretation. Perhaps the authors intended the interpretation to come from the readers, who can relate their memories to the images produced in the book.

In many ways this Norwich scrapbook is a family album, a way to stimulate memories and to relate people and places to a shared history. Those who grew up in Norwich can study this book and recall the village of Lewiston before I-91, or the Connecticut River before the Wilder Dam, or they can recall Dan and Whit’s general store from another era. Who are the women with the wonderful hats in the 1916 photograph on page 137? But for the general reader interested in the history of Vermont towns and the changing nature of rural life, this book would be more useful if there had been more analysis, more structure, and a stronger narrative voice. However, we can agree with the authors of the multicultural chapter, who write, “We hope this chapter will serve as a substantive introduction and an encouragement to others to continue research into these fascinating and important dimensions of our town history.”

ALLEN F. DAVIS

Allen F. Davis is professor emeritus of history at Temple University. He is the author of Postcards from Vermont (2003).

Little Jerusalem: Burlington's Jewish Community

Produced by Dorothy Dickie (Colchester, Vt.: Vermont Public Television, 2012, DVD, \$70 contribution to VPR).

Old timers from the Jewish neighborhood that was once centered in Burlington’s Old North End called their neighborhood “Little Jerusalem,” but they might just as easily have called it “Little Cekiske” (pronounced *shai-kash-ek*), which was the name of the Lithuanian *shtetl*

from which at least a few dozen of their forbears had come in the mid-1880s. As this eloquent documentary from Vermont Public Television shows, the first several decades of Jewish life in Burlington reproduced many of the conditions of East European *shtetl* life, absent its most severely degrading circumstances. It even *looked* like a *shtetl*. When, in one of the film's most visually effective segments, the wide green pastures, herds of dairy cattle, and large wooden farmhouses just outside current-day Cekiske flash across the screen, it is hard to tell that we aren't viewing the rolling landscapes of the Champlain Valley that marked the immediate outskirts of Burlington's Little Jerusalem. Moreover, several of the featured speakers in the film attest to Little Jerusalem's striking replication of the *shtetl*'s close-knit Orthodox culture. Some seventy years after all but a few of the old neighborhood's Jewish residents left it for the still greener pastures of suburban Burlington (not to mention a host of other North American regions and municipalities), old timers describe the North End's Jewish life in both affectionate and, occasionally, disparaging ways. In the words of one speaker, it gave its residents a "wonderful closeness." At the same time, it often felt "insular," or, as one speaker put it, like "a very provincial, choking thing."

Viewers of this film aren't pressured to wax nostalgic for a time when women were consigned to the upper deck of the synagogue sanctuary, Jewish boys had to fight gangs of roving anti-Semitic kids in the streets of their own neighborhood, and disgruntled members of the community's first synagogue (Ohavi Zedek, on Archibald Street) left to form two separate synagogues within a community that, at the time, had fewer than three hundred Jews altogether. The film achieves an ideal balance of warmth and poignancy, on the one hand, and historical accuracy, on the other. The preponderance of its most affecting scenes show us old-time residents visiting their former haunts, recounting the community's heyday, and being genuinely moved by the experience of their collective return. Several scenes are filmed in the old synagogues themselves, one of which (Archibald Street) still has an active congregation. While the voices in the film are nearly all voices from the present recounting the past, however, significant portions of its visual material are drawn from a range of archival photographs, and the juxtapositions of contemporary footage and historical images are evocative.

In one of the film's most powerful segments, old and new are brought into particularly dynamic proximity. Shortly after its 1889 founding on Hyde Street as a breakaway congregation from Ohavi Zedek, members of the community's second synagogue (Chai Adam) commissioned one of its members, Ben Zion Black (he was a sign painter by trade, but he was also an active Yiddish poet and regular contributor to the *Jewish*

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Daily Forward newspaper in New York City), to paint a mural that might serve as a backdrop for the ark where the Torah was kept. When the synagogue closed several decades ago, the mural was all but forgotten. *Little Jerusalem* shows us former members of Chai Adam returning to the building, walking up its narrow staircase, and viewing—for the first time in over fifty years—Black’s striking depiction of the Lions of Judah guarding the Torah, or the place where the Torah once was. As he encounters the mural in what is now one of several apartments in the long-ago deconsecrated *shul*, former resident Mark Rosenthal speaks some of the film’s most eloquent words: “I’m not a religious person. I’m a traditionalist,” says Mr. Rosenthal. “And I just remember the things that were connected by belonging.”

Before World War II, Little Jerusalem was a thriving Jewish community in large part because Burlington, while many of its gentile residents were hardly welcoming of the Jews in their midst, was an economically bustling crossroads. The Jews of the Old North End had begun their years in Vermont as traveling peddlers; by the early decades of the twentieth century, they had established dozens of successful businesses, including groceries, bottling plants, junk dealerships, and furniture stores. As had been the case with so many other Jewish communities in small-town America, prosperity led directly to dissolution. In the postwar atmosphere, in which returning veterans (most of whom were American-born and at least one, if not two generations separate from the neighborhood’s immigrant founders) established families of their own, the replicated *shtetl* of Little Jerusalem felt neither inevitable nor attractive. Many men and women from the old neighborhood stayed connected to Burlington, even if they no longer lived within its immediate environs. Their Jewishness, however, did not take shape in the image of an inherited orthodoxy. In 1952, Ohavi Zedek moved into a more normatively *American* synagogue, and its members assumed the mantle of the more thoroughly assimilated Jewish identity that defines the current era.

MICHAEL HOBERMAN

Michael Hoberman is an associate professor of English at Fitchburg State University, Massachusetts.