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BOOK REVIEWS



The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Handbook of the Collection

By Mark D. Mitchell (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: Trustees of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, 2005, pp. 152, paper \$14.95).

The St. Johnsbury Athenaeum is a national treasure and this new guide to the collection is a welcome and long overdue publication. Printed in full color with 176 illustrations, it is both handsome and concise.

Like any good handbook this is a volume you will want to peruse during a visit to see the collection, and it does not disappoint. It is like a well-ordered meal—substantial but not too heavy. To this reader the most useful sections are a brief overview of the founding of the Athenaeum (“The Lens of History: An Art Collection for St. Johnsbury,” pp. 13–29) and the Catalogue of the Collection (pp. 34–117). There are also short sections devoted to “A Visitor’s Guide to Looking at Art,” “Self-guided Tours,” and “Resources for Teachers.” Additionally, there are suggestions for further reading and a useful index.

The introductory essay is brief but illuminating, and while it may not add significantly to what we know about the Athenaeum or Horace Fairbanks (1820–1888), its founder, it does give a good sense of the importance of his extraordinary gift to the community.

Of course, the most remarkable thing about the Athenaeum collection is that it survives virtually intact. And although almost half of the works of art were gifts of Theodora Willard Best, Fairbanks’s granddaughter, shortly after the turn of the century, all of these pictures are thought to have been collected by Fairbanks himself. A handful of works, including four Works Progress Administration-era murals, came later in

the twentieth century, but for practical purposes the collection is a coherent time capsule of American artistic taste from the 1870s. Somewhat surprisingly, no pictures appear to have been removed over time. Few other institutions can make that claim. And perhaps most important, the collection is still installed largely in the manner of the gallery when it opened in 1873.

Scholars will be disappointed to learn that little information survives on how and from whom Fairbanks acquired his collection. The author argues that Fairbanks accomplished it virtually on his own, by visiting the annual exhibits of the National Academy of Design (New York), through social connections developed by his membership in the Century Club, and when he “regularly visited the artists’ studios, where he purchased significant works even before they were displayed publicly” (p. 26; such as that of John George Brown, p. 53). This is quite an achievement, as one might have expected Fairbanks to utilize the advice and expertise of art dealers or agents.

The collection of 128 paintings, sculptures, and prints consists of American landscapes and genre pictures of the 1860s and 1870s (45), contemporary European paintings (28), copies of Old Master paintings (16), American and European sculpture (15), portraits (6), and a miscellaneous group (18) in other media (murals, prints, and a mosaic). Each of these works is illustrated here with a small color picture and accompanied by a short but informative descriptive text, although indication whether a work is signed, dated, or otherwise inscribed is omitted.

The centerpiece of the collection, both literally and figuratively, is Albert Bierstadt’s enormous (116 × 180 inches) 1867 painting, *The Domes of Yosemite*. The Connecticut financier Legrand Lockwood commissioned it for \$25,000, the most an American painter to that date had received for a single painting. Six years later Fairbanks purchased the picture when Lockwood declared personal bankruptcy. It alone has always been worth a trip to Athenaeum, and one only wishes the author had incorporated a few more tidbits of information about the circumstances of its acquisition. For example, at least one other author has stated that the Athenaeum’s architect, John Davis Hatch, was instrumental in the picture’s purchase by Fairbanks and that after it arrived in St. Johnsbury, Bierstadt visited almost every year to see it (Claire Dunne Johnson, *St. Johnsbury* [1966], p. 25). One can’t help wondering if space could not have been found to include similar relevant facts about some of the other paintings, as well.

But these are minor quibbles. One can imagine Horace Fairbanks leafing through this handbook and concluding that the Athenaeum’s art collection is in good hands today and admired much as he hoped it would

be over 130 years ago. And for those who can't make the trip to St. Johnsbury, this book is a worthy substitute.

RICHARD H. SAUNDERS

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Revolutionary Heart: The Life of Clarina Nichols and the Pioneering Crusade for Women's Rights

By Diane Eickhoff (Kansas City, Quindaro Press, 2006, pp. 277, paper, \$14.95)

Here, at last, is a book-length biography of a figure who can rightly be called Vermont's most notable nineteenth-century champion of women's rights. For readers who are familiar with Nichols's work as a newspaper editor and reformer here in the Green Mountain State, this book provides a full account of her life after she left Vermont in the late eighteen-fifties for the newly settled Territory of Kansas. For those who have never heard of Nichols, Eickhoff has produced a highly readable and sympathetic portrait of this intelligent and caring crusader who put her considerable talents as a lecturer, journalist, and activist to the service of such causes as antislavery, temperance, and the drive to give women economic and political rights.

One of Eickhoff's accomplishments in this book is to show how Nichols was drawn gradually into the world of reform. As a child in the 1820s she overheard her father, then serving as Townshend's Overseer of the Poor, regretfully denying aid to the destitute women who came to him for town support.

Clarina's own disastrous first marriage in 1830 to a feckless and abusive husband only deepened this awareness of women's economic powerlessness. After obtaining a divorce from the Vermont legislature, Clarina continued to ponder the wrongs suffered by women and came to realize that they would never gain real security for themselves and their children unless they obtained economic rights, including property rights.

Beginning in the 1840s, after her marriage to George Nichols, the editor of the *Windham County Democrat*, Clarina used the columns of that paper to air her concerns and recommendations on such questions. While her writings were successful in getting the Vermont Legislature to pass a limited property rights bill in 1847, the measure left unaddressed the

issue of giving wives control of both their earnings and their personal property.

Gradually, Clarina Nichols came to understand that the only way to obtain true economic justice for women was to extend to them the political rights needed to translate such justice into law. Thus, in 1851, she joined the woman's rights movement, making her successful debut as a public speaker at a convention held that year in Worcester, Massachusetts. Nichols's ability to reach her listeners through stories, especially heart-breaking stories about women who had been treated unjustly by the law, was the bench mark of all her speechmaking, and the key to her success. The Worcester speech was published as a tract and widely distributed.

A year later, in 1852, Nichols became the first woman to address the Vermont Legislature, calling on the lawmakers to give women the right to vote in school meetings. While the speech itself delighted the lawmakers, they were not yet ready for such radical reform and voted down the partial suffrage measure.

In 1853 George and Clarina decided to sell the *Democrat* and move to the Territory of Kansas. When asked why she wished to bury herself on the prairie when she'd only just launched her woman's rights campaign in Vermont, Nichols replied that it was far easier to adopt good laws in the organization of new states than to repeal unjust statutes in established ones like Vermont. In 1859 she did play a small but significant role in getting a limited school suffrage measure included in the new Kansas state constitution.

While Eickhoff successfully captures the womanly and generous aspects of Clarina's character, Nichols is more complex than the individual portrayed here. The passionate reformer and lively political debater, for example, are only hinted at in these pages. Eickhoff also underplays the considerable enmity Nichols faced here in Vermont, both as a divorced woman and as a reformer. Lyn Blackwell, in her writings on Nichols, has pointed to her lifelong sensitivity concerning her reputation as a virtuous woman. This surely influenced Nichols's desire to be seen as 'womanly' as much or more than Eickhoff's contention that a womanly approach was more publicly appealing.

In later life Clarina Nichols wrote Abby Hemenway that she would like to be remembered in Vermont "as someone who labored *first* and *alone* against the reproaches, ridicule and the vile prejudices of many dear to me" (quoted in Joseph G. Gambone, ed., "The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas: The Papers of Clarina I. H. Nichols, 1854-1885," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40:4 [Winter, 1974], p. 434). Eickhoff does not give this lonely stand for a righteous cause the attention it deserves, especially in the chapters covering Clarina's years in Vermont.

These reservations aside, this book can be recommended as a lively and readable introduction to a remarkable Vermont woman and the age in which she lived.

DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

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Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865–1910

By Paul M. Searls (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006, pp. 256, \$65.00; paper, \$26.00).

Two Vermonts is a thoughtful, thought-provoking book. According to its author, Paul Searls, Vermonters have not been as united or as secure in their common identity as they might think, because they have long been at odds “over the social and economic consequences of industrial capitalism” (p. 5). The industrial revolution changed Vermont in the late nineteenth century. The state became less pastoral as factories, quarries, and pulp mills dotted its landscape; its population became less homogeneous as workers arrived from Quebec, Ireland, Sweden, and Italy; and its local institutions became less robust as schools consolidated and the state government grew more powerful. The changes did not go far enough to suit the tastes of “downhill” people, who felt that Vermont was “not keeping pace” with the rest of the world in its economic and cultural development (p. 5). The movers and shakers in Burlington, Rutland, and the state’s other principal towns were frustrated: Vermont was the poorest state in New England, the least supportive of higher education, the least able to attract immigrants, and the least willing to commit public funds to spur economic development. But the changes caused by industrial revolution had already gone too far to suit “uphill” people, who lived in Vermont’s hill towns and rural neighborhoods. They felt that the state was going in the wrong direction. Town rule and the state’s democratic traditions were in jeopardy as capitalists and state officials consolidated their power and monopolized resources. “True Vermonters,” who embraced Vermont’s bedrock values—family, faith, community, frugality, and hard work—were an endangered species, overwhelmed by the influx of outsiders and alien ideas.

The disappointment of “uphill” and “downhill” Vermonters was only

partially meliorated by their pride in the state's natural beauty, its "unspoiled" scenery, and its quaint towns; and the differences between uphill and downhill Vermont were becoming all the more clear. In downhill Vermont, "as in the rest of the industrializing nation, localism gradually gave way to centralization, and personal relationships to contractual ones. As the countryside converted to dairying and grew old, meanwhile, uphill Vermont moved in the opposite direction: its communities were increasingly homogeneous, their decisions increasingly driven by consensus, their society increasingly stable." By the late nineteenth century, Vermonters followed "two distinct patterns of life" and struggled against each other for "control of institutions" and "collective memory"—that is, the state's identity (p. 18). The difference corresponded "roughly" to the difference between "village" and "country," but the distinction "was fundamentally about ideology and temperament" (p. 11).

Some political leaders, like Justin Morrill, tried to reconcile "uphill" and "downhill" Vermont. Morrill, as the son of a rural blacksmith who became a successful merchant and national politician, lived in both worlds, and he championed causes that he believed would serve both. Land grant colleges would help small farmers and modernize agriculture; tariffs would help wool farmers and manufacturers; and breaking the slave power would further urban and industrial growth while preserving opportunities for small farmers and shopkeepers in the "free soil" West.

But as the century progressed, Vermont's political leaders found it harder and harder to find common ground between "uphill" and "downhill" Vermonters. When state leaders folded the new agricultural college into the University of Vermont, "uphill" Vermonters cried foul and demanded an independent college that would serve farmers exclusively. In 1892, when the legislature folded local school districts into consolidated town districts, "uphill" voters rebelled and branded the new law "the Vicious Act" (p. 89). When the Vermont Fish and Game League, a lobbying group for the state's tourist hoteliers and wealthy sportsmen, hired a Boston detective in 1898 to help state wardens enforce Vermont's game laws, resistance in the countryside was fierce. One angry deer hunter told a warden that "the Fish and Game League could go to hell" (pp. 92–93). "Downhill" Vermonters, for their part, were upset because "uphill" Vermonters supported prohibition and railroad regulation and opposed women's suffrage, positions that struck "downhill" Vermonters as backward-looking. By World War I, the views of "uphill" and "downhill" Vermonters had "diverged to the point of mutual incomprehension" (p. 49). They had no common identity or purpose. "'Vermonters' existed only in the dialogue between competing definitions of it" (p. 81).

Two Vermonts is an outstanding book, a timely look at a debate that persists among Vermonters to this day. It would have been nice to hear more from “uphill” Vermonters in their own words, given the number of letters and diaries that have survived from hill towns and remote rural neighborhoods. “Downhill” Vermonters are more fully realized characters in *Two Vermonts* than “uphill” Vermonters. The prohibition controversy of the late nineteenth century could also bear further study. Prohibition was a decidedly “downhill” movement in the 1830s and 1840s. How did it become “uphill”? And finally, why were Vermonters less deeply divided in the late nineteenth century than other Americans, and why do they remain less divided on most public issues than other Americans today? The struggle between “uphill” and “downhill”—or more broadly, “provincial” and “cosmopolitan”—has been far more bitter and politically enervating in Ohio, Kansas, South Carolina, and elsewhere than in Vermont. Relations between “uphill” and “downhill” Vermonters are sometimes tense, but they are civil, and civic leaders of every political stripe are still trying to forge an identity for Vermont that encompasses all citizens, not just a favored few. The majority of Vermont’s leaders stand in the tradition of Justin Morrill. Searls’ study focuses too narrowly on Vermont to explain why. But *Two Vermonts* is an exemplary book, which takes us far toward an answer.

RANDOLPH ROTH

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Jay Cooke’s Gamble: The Northern Pacific Railroad, the Sioux, and the Panic of 1873

By M. John Lubetkin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006, pp. xviii, 380, \$29.95).

This book’s title suggests that it is about Jay Cooke, America’s most respected banker following the Civil War, and his efforts, and ultimate failure, to successfully finance the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad (NP). It does discuss this subject, but that is just an artistic artifice. The book’s *raison d’être* is the story of the exploration and survey of eastern Minnesota, the Dakota badlands, and the Yellowstone

River Valley, a region that lay astride the railroad's proposed route from the western end of Lake Superior to the Washington/Oregon coast.

Once across the Missouri River into what is now North Dakota, the railroad's route entered unmapped territory. And part of it was through the last remaining significant hunting grounds of the combative Sioux. Chief Sitting Bull was determined to defend these lands from exploitation by the railroad. So, to protect the railroad's survey crews from attack, the U.S. Army provided substantial armed escorts.

As Lubetkin forthrightly tells us in the book's preface, this is the real substance of his story. He is sharing the adventures of survey chief Thomas Rosser, his several survey parties, and their army escorts as they made their way across the Dakota badlands, and into the Yellowstone River Valley in the face of Sioux resistance. It is a rousing tale told with both wit and vigor. The story is supported with an abundance of firsthand diary entries, letters, and other primary sources. Unfortunately, this part of the story, like the rest of the book, is not always clearly articulated.

In many cases reference to the author's sources is necessary to understand the importance and significance of the events he describes. Also, the transitions between paragraphs and between topics are poor. One of the most egregious examples of this problem concerns Col. David S. Stanley's temperance attack on his cavalry's whiskey (p. 194). With no previous indication that alcohol was an issue on the 1873 survey expedition, we abruptly learn that Stanley—himself perhaps the expedition's worst alcohol abuser—ordered the destruction of his cavalry officer's surreptitious whiskey cache. The effect this action had on the expedition, except to increase the already existing tension between Stanley and his cavalry commander, Col. George A. Custer, is not discussed. Also, to add to our confusion, the same paragraph says that Custer hated whiskey and tried to prohibit its availability when campaigning. If that was the case, why did he permit his officers to have a secret supply in the first place?

The availability and placement of maps is another problem. Missing is a map showing the Northern Pacific's entire route from Lake Superior to the West Coast. Readers unfamiliar with the region would find this very useful. Those maps that are included in the book are very informative, but their placement, deep within a chapter, makes them hard to find. Also, the map illustrating the events described on pages 131–147 is located back on page 90.

Closer to home, Lubetkin is harshly critical of the Northern Pacific's early Vermont-based managers and their governance of the railroad's construction. The author has little use for J. Gregory Smith, the railroad's first president, accusing him of mismanagement and pilfering the

railroad's treasury (p. 72 for a typical example). The evidence he offers for these assertions is found in secondary sources, news items, and allusions to Smith's financial manipulation of the Central Vermont Railroad. Readers familiar with Smith's abuse of the Central Vermont will find Lubetkin's condemnation all too reasonable. Yet the author's accusations, as they apply to the Northern Pacific, are not specific and are phrased in terms considerably stronger than those found in the cited sources. Lubetkin adds nothing concrete to our existing knowledge of Smith or his methods. The author's most credible sources on Smith's activities on the Northern Pacific—Paxton E. Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke*, and Henrietta M. Larson, *Jay Cooke*—both indicate that the expenses Lubetkin is complaining about were valid (although probably inflated) operating expenses. Unfortunately, by 1873 they were stretching the finite financial resources of both the railroad and Jay Cooke.

Lubetkin also finds fault with the Northern Pacific's management of its construction contracts. On page 53 he asserts that "graft permeated the Northern Pacific but after 135 years the only 'proof' lies in the strange contracts . . . shoddy construction and so forth." Unfortunately, while he cites numerous letters written to Cooke complaining of poor construction, neither Lubetkin nor his sources provide examples of those strange contracts or tell us where to find them!

Despite its faults, *Jay Cooke's Gamble* has something to say to readers interested in the history of the territories that became the north central states. It will be less useful for those of us curious about Vermonters and their contribution to the Northern Pacific Railroad's early years.

GERALD B. FOX

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*Dateline Vermont: Covering and Uncovering
the Newsworthy Stories that Shaped
a State—and Influenced a Nation*

By Chris Graff (North Pomfret, Vermont: Thistle Hill Publications, 2006, pp. 240, \$24.95).

During December Vermont Public Television (VPT) invites viewers to choose the top news story of the year from a list of items nomi-

nated by journalists. My choice in 2006 would have been “Chris Graff, Vermont Associated Press bureau chief, fired.” Despite the wide-ranging protests the firing generated throughout the state, it was not nominated. My second choice, Judge Edward Cashman’s controversial sentencing of a child molester, was not specifically linked to Graff’s firing, but the AP bureau chief was prominent in his criticism of a high profile TV network commentator’s version of events, and Graff’s narrative leads one to conclude that it was the cause for his dismissal and not AP’s public reason for his firing.

There is of course, far more than that to *Dateline Vermont*, Chris Graff’s memoir of his career as a journalist covering Vermont news and politics. Chris had worked for the AP for twenty-seven years, much of that time as bureau chief and for the last fifteen years also as host of VPT’s news show, *Vermont This Week*. He came to North Pomfret, Vermont, in 1965 and subsequently attended Middlebury College where an encounter with fellow student Jim Douglas introduced him into news broadcasting. Graff gravitated to print journalism where he emerged as one of the state’s most respected and influential correspondents. For more than a quarter century he reported on Vermont’s elections and the personalities that dominated those events.

Graff makes every effort at evenhandedness, but personal preferences, with which readers may not always agree, occasionally show through his graceful prose.

For example, although Howard Dean was hardly Graff’s favorite governor, he is not among those who assert that the governor distanced himself from personal support for civil unions. That Dean signed the civil unions bill into law in private, surrounded only by his staff, suffices for many critics as irrefutable evidence of his hostility. Graff makes it clear that there is more to the story.

Dean had declared himself opposed to same-sex marriage. However, within an hour after the Vermont Supreme Court issued its ninety-three-page decision that interpreted the state constitution’s common benefits clause to include gay couples, “who seek nothing more, nor less, than legal protection and security to their avowed commitment to a lasting human relationship,” the governor asserted that it was “in the best interest of all Vermonters, gay and straight, to go forward with the domestic partnership act and not the gay marriage act.” In his subsequent state of the state address Dean called upon the legislature to respond to the Supreme Court ruling, “which confirms that all Vermonters, including gay and lesbian Vermonters, are to have equal benefits under the law.” On the afternoon when he signed the civil unions act in the privacy of his chambers, Dean labeled the bill “a courageous and powerful statement

about who we are in the State of Vermont” and declared that “the bill enriches all of us as we look with new eyes [at] a group of people who have been outcasts for many, many generations.”

Implicit in Graff’s account is that one can credit or blame Dean for the Civil Unions Act, but you can’t tar him with indifference.

Other explicit examples of Graff’s personal judgments are included in an appendix that comments on his choice of the top twenty stories and the ten most influential Vermonters of the twentieth century.

Dateline Vermont is an easy read and merits inclusion in every Vermonter’s library. Readers easily bored by Vermont politics will take pleasure in Graff’s discussions of Act 60 and school reform, civil unions, and the take back Vermont movement. Readers with no special interest in Vermont may be captivated by an account of Howard Dean’s presidential run or the apparent validity of Graff’s claims that a state as small as Vermont can influence the nation. One small criticism: if the volume should ever be reprinted or issued in paperback, it would profit from an index.

Finally, the testimonials printed on the back cover reveal an unintended facet of the state’s character. Governor James Douglas and Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders (writing as then U.S. Representative) all provide endorsements. The book was written before the 2006 elections and this reviewer suspects that had the prepublication proofs been circulated after the election, either of the candidates newly elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrat or Republican, would have signed onto the list. Vermonters are prone to regard as personal matters what others may see as controversies beyond their direct involvement. The outpouring of support for Chris Graff is a case in point. But it is also a tribute to a well-balanced and well-written memoir *cum* history that succeeds in bringing an intimacy to events.

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