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More About Vermont History

Compiled by PAUL A. CARNAHAN

BOOK REVIEWS



Restless Spirits & Popular Movements: A Vermont History

By Greg Guma (Burlington: Center for Research on Vermont, University of Vermont; Amherst, MA: White River Press, 2021, pp. vi, 286, paper, \$22.00).

In his *Restless Spirits & Popular Movements: A Vermont History*, veteran journalist Greg Guma examines how the state has followed the “Vermont way,” the distinctive blending of the seemingly contradictory urges of individualism and communitarianism. Those conflicting impulses took Vermont from being an independent region in the late 1700s to a reliably Republican stronghold from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, and then to the liberal bastion of today.

For readers new to Vermont history, this book will introduce key figures and important events that helped create the state they know today. For readers steeped in Vermont history, the book’s most rewarding parts will probably come in later chapters, where Guma draws from his decades of reporting to offer insights into some of the major political actors and movements from the late 1960s to the present.

Restless Spirits is an expanded print edition of a digital book titled *Green Mountain Politics: Restless Spirits, Popular Movements* that Guma published in 2017. The print version includes additional chapters and illustrations, which add roughly 100 pages to the original.

Greg Guma got his first newspaper job with the *Bennington Banner* in 1968. He later wrote for alternative newspapers and edited the *Vanguard Press* newspaper. Among his books is *The People’s Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution*, the 1989 history of Bernie Sanders’s political career and his work as Burlington mayor. *The People’s Republic* came out shortly before Sanders was first elected to Congress. In addition to reporting on progressive politics, Guma has been

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an activist in his own right, coordinating the Peace and Justice Center in Burlington, supporting immigrants' legal rights, and serving as CEO of Pacifica Radio, an organization of noncommercial, progressive/liberal stations.

Guma identifies a thread of orneriness and unwillingness to accept authority running through the Vermont body politic: whether it is Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys fighting New York colonial authorities over land rights; John Humphrey Noyes bucking propriety in the 1840s and starting a free-love religious community (before being run out of state); or Edna Beard having the guts to become the first woman elected to the Vermont legislature, and proposing laws that benefited women, initiatives that hadn't occurred to her male colleagues.

The early chapters, which take the narrative to the turn of the twentieth century, provide a brief, basic overview of selected episodes that determined the path Vermont would follow. After briefly surveying the Native American experience in this region from precontact to the present, Guma focuses on such subjects as the struggle of early settlers against the land claims of the colony of New York and invasion by the British; the tendency of earlier Vermonters to distrust those in power, culminating in the rise of the Anti-Masonic Party in the 1830s; the labor agitation of marble and granite workers during the early 1900s for safer conditions and better pay; and the rejection of a controversial 1930s project to construct a highway along the flanks of the Green Mountains.

Guma gives particular attention to James Edmund Burke, devoting an illuminating chapter to the largely forgotten politician who helped reshape Burlington during the early 1900s. As an Irish Catholic with progressive ideas, Burke found support among the city's ethnic neighborhoods, and narrowly defeated the establishment candidate in the 1903 mayoral race. Once in office, Burke fought entrenched interests to create a city-owned power plant and secure public access to the Lake Champlain waterfront. It is easy to see Burke as an inspiration for Sanders, whose political career Guma also chronicles.

Restless Spirits is thematically organized, rather than strictly chronologically structured. So a chapter about the progress of women's rights begins by discussing the groundbreaking activism of Clarina Howard Nichols in the late 1840s and ends by mentioning the election of Molly Gray as lieutenant governor in 2020. The subsequent chapter, which documents the rise of the Republican Party, returns to 1840 to provide context for the GOP's formation.

Journalism is sometimes called the first draft of history. As the action nears the present, Guma retraces some of the stories he covered

during his career, diving deeper into topics with which he is particularly familiar. Here he often relies on interviews he conducted with major Vermont political figures, sometimes as events were unfolding and sometimes in retrospect. As such, the reader gets comparatively detailed stories about leading politicians from the late 1960s onward.

Guma also takes time to discuss Vermont's tradition of local democracy through its annual town meetings, the rise of environmentalism as an important Vermont value, and the legislature's decision to make Vermont the first state to recognize civil unions.

Though Guma briefly mentions modern Abenaki campaigns for state and national recognition, a more thorough treatment would have fit the theme of the book well. Also, the text would have benefited from tighter fact-checking. For example, Ebenezer Allen is listed as one of Ethan Allen's brothers (they were cousins); Sen. Robert Stafford is referred to once as Thomas; and John Marshall is identified as the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court at the time of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling (it was Earl Warren).

Guma writes that the Vermont Way is encapsulated in the state motto, "Freedom and Unity." Over the years, Vermont has balanced those competing values by trying never to act too strongly in favor of the individual or the community, for the betterment of both. As Guma concludes: "Frequently a laboratory for autonomy, citizen government and local democracy, Vermont has become a mixture of pragmatism and idealism, tolerant, concerned and yet sometimes wary of newcomers or higher authorities, and naturally drawn to solutions that stress conservation and balance, civil liberties and human scale" (p. 261).

MARK BUSHNELL

Mark Bushnell writes about Vermont history for VT Digger.com. He is author of Hidden History of Vermont (2017) and It Happened in Vermont (2009).

Valcour: The 1776 Campaign That Saved the Cause of Liberty

By Jack Kelly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021, pp. 285, \$28.99).

The story behind the battle of Valcour Island will be familiar to *Vermont History* readers, but the event is probably less known outside of New England. Its significance to the War of Independence was vitally important, however. Valcour Bay, adjacent to the small island of the same name in the northern reaches of Lake Champlain, was

the battleground of the heroic struggle between a hastily built fleet of American warships and a vastly superior British fleet in October of 1776. Although the Americans were defeated, the effort to build ships and the ensuing naval contest delayed the British invasion of the rebel-ling colonies for a year. This pause gave the American forces much-needed time to muster a defense against Britain. This is the point that inspired Jack Kelly to write *Valcour*. Perhaps a surprise to many who read this book is that the most unlikely hero of this pivotal event was Benedict Arnold.

Kelly writes with a lively style. He begins by describing the American “trio of leaders.” Major General Philip Schuyler would perform a “miracle of logistics”; Major General Horatio Gates would “bring order from chaos”; and Benedict Arnold would act as “one of the most dynamic leaders available and an experienced seaman to boot” (p. 21). British Generals Guy Carleton and John Burgoyne are also given personalities based on historic references. The author suggests that if Burgoyne had been given his way and allowed to follow in the wake of the British fleet in October 1776, the rebellion could have been quashed in that year.

Kelly provides a wealth of important facts that were new to this reviewer. Echoing concerns of today, he provides interesting details about the Americans’ battle with smallpox, and the leaders’ views on early forms of inoculation. He describes Gates’s effort to replace tainted water with a beer brewed from molasses and flavored with spruce twigs. Also new to this reader were the discussions between Schuyler and the Native Americans in the general’s attempt to ensure their neutrality in the conflict. These pages and interesting passages about eighteenth-century communications and the spy network operated by both sides pair well his discussions of the difficulties of building and arming the fleets.

Although they were criticized by some earlier historians, Kelly gives what he considers overdue praise to both Gates’s and Schuyler’s efforts. He characterizes Carleton as cautious, a man who did not want to press until he knew he had the decided advantage. Kelly saves his highest praise for Arnold’s tenacity and tactics. On page 190, he writes:

By meeting the enemy in a forward position and keeping up a steady cannonade, Arnold had suggested to Guy Carleton the Americans possessed abundant supplies of gunpowder. The fight that day had run counter to the British commander’s notion that the American patriots were timid or insincere in their rebellion, or that that they were unprepared for war. The provincials had fought with determination. They had inflicted damage. Carleton could not avoid the sinking feeling that a long and costly effort would be needed to subdue them.

Arnold's "staunch resistance," the onset of winter, and supply worries led Carleton to return to Canada. As a result, Kelly writes, "History would look back on 1776, on the northern army's valiant effort, and on Guy Carleton's failure to carry out his invasion" (p. 240). Similarly, looking beyond 1776, he writes that "George Washington was a great general not because he won battles but because he kept the army in existence" (p. 241). Ultimately, America would secure independence, and the naval contest alongside Valcour Island was vital to the cause of liberty.

Kelly's book is well researched and includes an excellent bibliography. Several useful maps are provided in the front matter. The author relies extensively on quotations from letters and diaries to build personalities for the American and British leaders. These quotations form the basis of his source notes. Some history related to the causes of the American Revolution prior to this specific campaign is included. Ethan Allen's raid on Fort Ticonderoga and the American's disastrous winter attempt to seize Québec set the stage for Arnold to be placed in charge of the American shipbuilding effort.

The real strength of this book is Kelly's description of the conditions and chaos of the actual naval battle. I would recommend the book for these chapters alone. We are left to understand Arnold, not as traitor but as a brilliant military leader mistreated by the Continental Congress and by some of his superior officers jealous of his successes.

JOHN R. BRATTEN

John R. Bratten is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of West Florida. He is the author of The Gondola Philadelphia & the Battle of Lake Champlain (2002).

On Being a Vermonter and the Rise and Fall of the Holmes Farm 1822–1923

By David R. Holmes (Burlington: University of Vermont, Center for Research on Vermont, and Amherst, MA: White River Press, 2021, pp. iii, 256, paper, \$22.00).

David Holmes's ambition, admirably achieved, is to weave the following strands into one story: the Vermont character, the entrepreneurial history of his ancestral farm, the details of family life, and the changing historical context. It is a personal story as well, lovingly

told. Back in his native state after years away, he faced an “existential” question: “Am I, on returning home, an authentic Vermonter?” (p. 45).

A search for the Vermont character opens and closes the book, and character is important throughout. Although challenged by the diversity of Vermont’s population, by social and political change, and by inherent contradictions of human nature, Holmes ventures a description in his final chapter based on his family’s traits: “Vermonters are hard-working, resilient people who care about others and their community, have a sound moral foundation, work hard, know a lot, prefer things on a small scale, love the outdoors and the beauty of their state, and find humor in life’s absurdities” (p. 224). Uncertainty as to his own identity was eased by the feeling of “instant familiarity” as he studied the family documents, for “I have the DNA of the people who lived on the farm” (p. 224).

Many Vermonters, including this reviewer, like to think that we are in important ways distinctive, but the strength of the book lies less in its review of this familiar question than in its rich documentation of family and farm. Here Holmes is the indispensable source and interpreter. The farm was a blend of three pioneering families who came to Vermont in the late eighteenth century, Holmes to Monkton, Johns and Ross to Huntington. We are treated to impressive details about all three groups. In their new homes they farmed, intermarried, and were active in the Quaker community. In 1822 Nicholas Holmes left the family settlement in its difficult terrain to pay \$6,000 for 215 flat, fertile acres (one source says 115) in Charlotte on the shores of Lake Champlain. One of Vermont’s most engagingly documented farm enterprises was underway.

Holmes cites technical sources for descriptions of the rich clay and loam soils that were to sustain the “Entrepreneurs of the Land” (chapter 3). Success in farming required an entrepreneurial imagination and over the generations the farm’s enterprises included sheep, fruit trees (apples, pears, plums), bricks, race horses, eggs and chickens, wheat, hay, and dairy cows. Resourceful and ingenious, the family harvested ice, developed an irrigation system, and built three houses and other buildings. The Holmes bricks were used for several houses in Charlotte and Burlington and for the Charlotte Meeting House. “The Holmes family was passionate about horses,” we are told. “They rode them, raced them, bred them, and sold them” (p. 82), owning as many as seventy-five at one time. An entire chapter is given to the role of the family, C. T. Holmes in particular, in the professionalization of Vermont apple growing. At one time they owned the largest orchard in the

state, widely recognized for its advanced methods of cultivation and shipping.

This is a family story in the full sense, not just a farming one. We read in “Life on the Farm” (chapter 4) that a century-long family business required a cooperative spirit, perhaps encouraged by the Quaker faith, but also at times power at the center. When Jonathan, father of the family, became severely ill in the late 1870s, his wife, Hannah Smith Holmes, took over. A granddaughter remembered that “Grandma was a very strong-minded person who ruled her household with a firm hand”; and when her two sons married, she brought everyone together in the big family house and “controlled and managed the finances for all three families” (p. 104). Farm life was not all work. Sledding, skating, skiing, steamboat cruises, and family gatherings were enjoyed. The family did not hunt or fish for pleasure or food as did many families of the time.

The family valued education and took advantage of changing circumstances. A number of women sought education and careers well beyond the farm and local opportunities. We learn about the ways in which more recent descendants have enjoyed professional success and contributed to their communities.

“Foreclosure and Moving On” (chapter 6) tells the sad story of the demise of this 101-year-old enterprise. Over time the family had concentrated its main efforts on the orchard. Borrowed money had kept the Holmes farm going, as it had many farms. But after 1910 production slumped. There were dry years, cold winters, WWI, and the Spanish Flu. In the end, payments could not be met and on May 8, 1923, creditors took the property. Hoping for a better understanding of why the farm failed, Holmes draws on academic studies of family businesses outlining criteria for success. The farm measured up but was doomed by forces beyond its control. Holmes thinks of an “ancient definition of tragedy. . . despite good intentions and doing the right thing, things go badly.” He adds that “For farmers throughout history, this is not a new story” (p. 209).

Although scholarly in its wealth of information, annotations, bibliography, and index, the book is less a treatise than a historically grounded memoir. Its informal narration frees Holmes’s lively curiosity to include many excursions slightly off the main story, almost as sidebars. We follow him with pleasure.

CHARLES FISH

Charles Fish photographs and writes about Vermont from his home in Dummerston. He is the author of In Good Hands: The Keeping of a Family Farm (1995).

Harris Hill Ski Jump, The First 100 Years

By 100th Anniversary Book Committee (Brattleboro, VT: Harris Hill Ski Jump, Inc., 2021, pp. 120, paper \$28.95).

Vermont is home to a number of places that loom large in the history of winter sports, both regionally and nationwide. Places such as Gilbert's Hill, Mount Mansfield, and a host of resorts from Bromley to Mount Snow are well known to historians for their innovative techniques, colorful personalities, and lasting impacts on recreation here and elsewhere. *Harris Hill Ski Jump, The First 100 Years* reminds us that a once-modest ski jump in Brattleboro deserves a position among the giants of Vermont's winter-sports history as well.

Harris Hill gets its name from Brattleboro native Fred Harris, who as a college student in 1922 built a pioneering ski jump in his hometown. Harris's jump eventually became a training site for premier jumpers, a proving ground for future Olympians, and a home to high-profile annual competitions as well as numerous national championships. *Harris Hill Ski Jump* tells this story through a series of short, generously illustrated chapters that trace an arc from the jump's heady, early decades through a period of decline in the last decades of the twentieth century, to its reconstruction and promising future at the start of the twenty-first. The chapters collectively highlight Harris Hill's development, the evolution of ski jumping (including a very informative section on the changing styles of jumpers in flight), and the centrality of jumpers from Vermont and, more specifically, the Brattleboro area itself. But perhaps above all else, the chapters highlight the efforts of committed supporters and community leaders to manage and sustain the jump. It would be hard to read this book and not gain an appreciation for their work. There is a can-do spirit running throughout this narrative that will speak to many Vermonters, and that allows the book to highlight Brattleboro's rightful place in the larger history of ski jumping.

Harris Hill Ski Jump, The First 100 Years is itself a product of that same collaborative spirit. The book was published by a dedicated committee of Harris Hill enthusiasts; its text was written by Vermont journalist, Kevin O'Connor; and the research and design teams included a wide range of specialists. But it is the book's illustrations—also drawn from a variety of sources, including private collectors and the venerable *Brattleboro Reformer*—that make it a page-turner. The drama of ski jumping and the enthusiasm that spectators and participants have for the

sport have clearly left behind a rich photographic heritage, and one can imagine that the book's editors had some difficult choices to make about what to include and what to leave out.

One of the qualities that readers might appreciate most about this book is the way its illustrations highlight changes in the sport over time, while at the same time capturing something of its enduring essence. The best expression of this is its use of a reoccurring image showing a lone, airborne jumper, photographed from behind and silhouetted above rapt spectators in the foreground and an outrun and parking lot far below. At first, I found myself flipping between the book's pages and focusing on the differences in these images from one decade to the next: the differences between styles of jumping and the clothing worn by spectators; the growing density of forests on the surrounding hillsides; and the changing styles of cars (and even the presence of horses) in the parking lot.

But as interesting as these differences are, I also found myself drawn to a core similarity running through the silhouetted-jumper photographs—a similarity born of repetition that suggests something more universal and timeless about both ski jumping and the history of Harris Hill. On the one hand, the photographs moved me to contemplate whatever it is about the human spirit that makes someone want to fly as a silhouette against the sky. The image of a jumper frozen in mid-flight seemed to amplify the magnitude of their effort in a particularly dramatic way—one that was enhanced further by the expressions on the faces of spectators below. The repetition of that image through the years evoked in me an emotive response that felt somehow timeless and elemental, giving the book a resonance that transcended the specifics of its subject. On the other hand, the magnitude of the jumper's flight moved me to contemplate whatever it is that makes people come together to create—literally, to build—the kinds of spaces necessary for such displays of human emotion to flourish. This is unquestionably a book about a very local place and a very specific sport, but it is also a book that can make you think more broadly about how communities work together to make positive things happen, in this case to bring joy to the jumper and to the audience for which they perform. For readers eager to imagine that communities can indeed still coalesce around a common objective designed to serve a greater good, the story of Harris Hill offers a surprising and welcome reason to believe.

BLAKE HARRISON

Blake Harrison has worked for decades in a mix of agriculture and academics in New England, and is the author of The View from Vermont: Tourism and the Making of an American Rural Landscape (2006).