

Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS



Ira Allen: A Biography

By J. Kevin Graffagnino (Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2024, pp. 207, paper, \$24.99).

As young scholars under the guidance of Vermont history deans Nick Muller and Sam Hand, Kevin Graffagnino and I embarked on our academic journeys together in the Spring 1978 edition of *Vermont History*. Graffagnino contributed “The Vermont ‘Story’: Continuity and Change in Vermont Historiography,” while I authored “The Welfare of the Regions Beyond.” Despite extended tenures at the Kentucky Historical Society and the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, Graffagnino’s dedication has resulted in fifteen Vermont books and over two dozen articles, earning him, in my opinion, the well-deserved title of our generation’s “Dean of Vermont History.”

This biography, which originated as a 1980s dissertation, has matured with age. In a 1988 *Vermont Life* article and a 1991 chapter in the University of Vermont’s bicentennial history, Graffagnino described Ira Allen as a “hard founding father to love.” However, in this book, he adopts a more measured approach, seeking to understand Ira’s motivations, personality, and aspirations. Graffagnino portrays Ira, a nineteen-year-old arriving in the New Hampshire Grants in 1770, as a “lone wolf” for whom “family and business were all that really mattered” (p. 23). Despite his preference for privacy, Ira’s personal aspirations on Vermont’s revolutionary frontier were no less ambitious than his famous older brother, Ethan Allen.

Having taught Vermont history for two decades, I found the early chapters—detailing the struggle over the New Hampshire Grants and the “revolution within a revolution” from 1775 to 1782—largely familiar.

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However, Graffagnino sheds new light on Ira's singular focus in 1772 on the economic potential of land near Lake Champlain, a vision not entirely shared by his brothers. While Ethan led the Green Mountain Boys in capturing Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775, Ira stayed behind to survey land, direct work crews, build mills, and construct Fort Frederick in Colchester to protect the Onion River Land Company's investments.

Following the death of his cousin Remember Baker and Ethan's capture in 1775 during an ill-fated attack on Montreal, Graffagnino tracks Ira's "slow ascension in Grants leadership" (p. 52). As secretary of the Council of Safety, he secured military reinforcements and implemented a controversial "sequestration and confiscation" policy, seizing Loyalist property to fund Vermont's government while redistributing prime properties to himself and others in his political circle. His 1779 appointment as Vermont's first surveyor general provided additional opportunities to augment the Allen family's vast land holdings. And, while Vermont historians have long debated the Allen brothers' motives during the 1781–1782 Haldimand Negotiations, Graffagnino's research leaves little doubt of Ira's leadership role and intentions.

However, Ira's fortunes declined after 1783. The postwar influx of settlers, unaligned with the Allen family's interests, weakened his influence. With Ethan retiring in 1782 to write his "deist bible" and exchanging his Onion River land rights in 1787 for a 1,000-acre Burlington farm, Ira found himself increasingly isolated. Political adversaries questioned his integrity, leading to the loss of his council seat and surveyor general position. Chapter 7, "A Crumbling Empire," presents compelling evidence that "while Ira was struggling, the rest of Vermont was thriving" (p. 161).

The book's final two chapters offer a riveting and original account of Ira's relentless ambition and ultimate downfall. His attempts at statesmanship in 1791—establishing the University of Vermont and negotiating a canal to bypass the rapids on the Richelieu and make Burlington a major port—were undermined by financial instability and a tarnished reputation. Subject to growing financial pressures driven by rival claims, growing debt, and a dearth of cash, Ira remained tone-deaf to the changing political landscape and resolute in his determination. Disillusioned with ongoing British disinterest in the construction of a Richelieu canal, he turned to the post-Jacobian French Directory with a proposal to restore Canada to France. Graffagnino's meticulous research brings to life the dramatic—and at times, the unbelievable—series of events that followed. These include Ira's agreement with the revolutionary French government to secure 20,000 muskets, the British interception of the ship *Olive Branch*, his imprisonment in France, and his prolonged legal

battles to reclaim his property while fending off Vermont creditors, including family members. Ultimately, his story concludes in exile and death in Philadelphia in 1814—an epic tale of ambition, intrigue, and misfortune.

Graffagnino's original 1978 *Vermont History* article highlighted “continuity” in Vermont's historical narrative, including the mythicization of Ethan Allen at the expense of other founding figures. This biography, however, breaks new ground, offering fresh insights into the motivations, ambitions, and challenges faced on a developing frontier. What emerges is a sobering, realistic portrait of a founding father whose grand aspirations were met with neither heroism nor triumph but rather a complex legacy of ambition and adversity.

P. JEFFREY POTASH

Jeff Potash is a former Professor of History at Trinity College (VT) and co-author, with Michael Sherman and Gene Sessions, of Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont (2004).

Vermontiana: An Annotated Checklist, 1764–1899

By J. Kevin Graffagnino (Burlington: Center for Research on Vermont. Silver Special Collections Library. University of Vermont, 2024: pp. xxviii+299, hardcover, \$45.00).

I have known Kevin Graffagnino since the late 1970s as a fellow member of the Vermont Antiquarian Booksellers Association. I have followed his many career paths as a book seller, appraiser, librarian, auctioneer, author, and administrator/curator at the University of Michigan's William L. Clements Library, as well as the University of Vermont's Howe Library and the Vermont Historical Society. His impressive knowledge has been acquired through many years among the books, maps, and ephemera of his native state of Vermont and its relationship to other facets of American history.

His latest volume offers encouragement to private and institutional collectors of paper Vermontiana. It also should be of interest to those who are curious about the many ways to approach the subject. The book contains 279 items listed in chronological order with descriptive notes highlighting their importance. It is physically heavy, and is filled with information on Vermont authors, map makers, and publishers.

Vermont has a small population, and the bibliographies one needs for consultation are also few. There is Marcus Gilman's *Bibliography of*

Vermont (1897), or T. D. Seymour Bassett's *Vermont: A Bibliography of Its History* (1981). And there are the many catalogs issued by the Tuttle Company in Rutland. One can also consult some more focused works like Marcus McCorison's *Vermont Imprints 1778–1820* and David Allen Cobb's special double issue of *Vermont History* containing his work on early Vermont maps.

And now, Graffagnino's *Vermontiana* joins these works in helping us discern what we are looking at, and what we *should* be looking at, when assembling a collection of Vermont paper items.

The "checklist" in the title might be misleading. This is not a simple listing of the items. Instead, this compilation embellishes the items with extremely informative descriptions. For example, when I opened the book at random to item 51 on page 106, I came upon Joseph A. Gallup's *Sketches of Epidemic Diseases in the State of Vermont: From Its First Settlement to the Year 1815*. Below the title we find a long quote from Gallup's book discussing a pneumonia epidemic in Windsor that became manageable by using bloodletting. This quote helps us understand both the author's writing style and the book's time period. Next, there is a full page of information about how well the book was received in its time, and the life and importance of Dr. Gallup. The background information is more than would ever be found in a simple checklist. And this typical example is true throughout the book. The many comprehensive descriptions bring the books to life.

Following each entry is a number indicating what the author considers to be its rarity. Number 1 is an item "readily obtainable from dealers or at auction." Number 2 is of moderate scarcity. 3 is "quite scarce." 4 is "rare." And 5 is "Very Rare." Obviously, Graffagnino has been studying the markets for many years and he uses his expertise to help us understand the relative availability of an item that might interest his readers.

Each entry also contains suggestions for related further readings. In addition to the many helpful black-and-white illustrations, an appendix, with shorter descriptions, lists publications up to the year 2000.

In his opening preface Graffagnino informs us about some of his Vermont predecessors and pointedly includes encouragement to new collectors. Many older checklists, exhaustive in their way, offer few facts beyond their listings. Commenting on those books, the author tells us that "Vermont antiquarian references are excellent on the who, what, where and when details, not so much on the 'why' and 'so what' factors that make serious collecting more than just a tunnel-vision exercise in accumulating." He writes that although many guides might include every book that exists, they leave us wanting to know more.

And that is where this handsome volume helps us fill that gap. It doesn't list every piece of printed Vermontiana (thank goodness), but the carefully chosen items help us to understand more about the times in which they were written and why they came into existence.

Graffagnino is a fine writer. He has about twenty-five other books to his credit and he knows how to make his points clearly, understandably, and sometimes passionately.

Over my fifty years of bookselling and research, I have seen no other book on the history of Vermont publications that provides us with this much knowledge and background information. It is a very helpful addition to the Vermont bookshelf for librarians, collectors, and researchers.

BEN KOENIG

Ben Koenig is the proprietor of The Country Bookshop, in Plainfield, Vermont. He is a past president of the Vermont Antiquarian Booksellers Association, and collects books and ephemera on bells, bell founding, and carillons.

Bygone Attractions of Chittenden County

By Bob Blanchard (Burlington, VT: Onion River Press, 2024, pp. 207, paper, \$24.99).

Through his nostalgic wanderings, Bob Blanchard's latest book, *Bygone Attractions of Chittenden County*, presents an entertaining chronicle of stories, memories, and histories of over a hundred popular everyday places of business and entertainment in Burlington and nearby communities in Chittenden County, Vermont. As the author notes in the preface, "from experience I've learned that nostalgia is something that far more people relate to than history." Indeed, this reflects the informal style of his writing that has a warmly engaging feel of reminiscing with old friends.

Organized by chapters on such topics as restaurants, snack bars, diners, shops, movie theatres, bowling alleys, motels, and resorts, nearly all the places discussed are illustrated with fetching photographs, most of which Blanchard obtained from the James Detore Archives at the University of Vermont Silver Special Collections, as well as from a range of other sources, including informal snapshots from his own collection and from others. These color and black-and-white photos are real treasures, as nearly all of the places mentioned are gone or have been substantially changed. Even so, for longtime residents of the area, the photographs and stories are sure to spark fond memories.

For most of the wide variety of interesting local places discussed in the book, the author provides overviews of their background histories and colorful descriptions of appearances, along with anecdotes about the people and activities associated with the businesses. For example, here is an excerpt about the “Sugar House” that was located in the basement of the former Hotel Vermont on Saint Paul Street near the corner of Main Street: “In the ’50s the Sugar House started serving dinner. It was a popular spot for civic groups to hold their meetings. In the evenings Red Dower would hold forth on the organ, which was situated on the inside portion of that old tree trunk that was no longer used as an entrance. The huge mural of Lake Champlain behind the bar was wired with electric lights, with an electronic mechanism to control them to simulate a sunset over the lake” (p. 87).

Another excerpt describes the iconic Bove’s Restaurant on Pearl Street in Burlington that captures the style of the writing and the author’s experience:

Bove’s featured huge portions at reasonable prices. Although Italian food was the draw for most, they also had a wide selection of “American food.” I remember when I had a much bigger appetite, I would order spaghetti with French fries and peas and walk away stuffed. Bove’s was a very popular place with the area’s many college students. At Bove’s they could get a filling, tasty meal for very little cash. In the glory decades from the ’50s through the ’70s, long lines to get in were a regular feature. But they moved quickly, as the servers were attentive and the food came out fast. It seemed that no matter when you ate at Boves, Babe was always there behind the bar, with a good word for everyone as they paid their bill. (p. 101).

Although the book focuses on stories about social life in Chittenden County in the mid-twentieth century (mainly from the 1930s through the 1970s), readers whose memories do not go back that far may nonetheless find this book to be of great interest. Indeed, with the perspective of one who has lived in Burlington for four decades, my attention was immediately captured by photos and stories that triggered fond memories of also dining at Bove’s Restaurant on Pearl Street, as well as of regularly shopping at Magram’s Department Store, Woolworth’s and Hagar Hardware on Church Street, and other now bygone places in downtown Burlington.

Although the stories of the former movie theaters and other entertainment venues were interesting, it is too bad that the author did not include Burlington’s now abandoned and threatened Memorial Auditorium on Main Street, which served as a huge attraction for residents and visitors through the period covered in this book. The section on bars also seems a tad skimpy. It was fun, however, to read the story about the infamous

Chicken Bone Café at the corner of King Street and South Champlain Street, an historic site that preservationists worked to save for new uses after the demise of the notorious bar.

As a local public historian, I have found this, as well as Bob Blanchard's previous book, *Lost Burlington* (2023), to be useful starting places for conducting scholarly or professional research. *Bygone Attractions of Chittenden County* lacks a map, index, and source notes, but as an informal record of our local public history, this paperback certainly serves as an entertaining read and a worthy keepsake.

Moreover, for newcomers and future readers, one can imagine that this latest book by Bob Blanchard may long provide a valuable record of insights into what life was like for those residing in or visiting the Burlington area during the mid-twentieth century.

THOMAS DURANT VISSER

Thomas Durant Visser is Professor of Historic Preservation in the History Department at the University of Vermont. He is the author of Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings (1997) and Porches of North America (2012).

In the Shadow of the Lonely Tree: A Memoir of Home, History, and Madness

By Cameron Clifford (West Hartford, VT: The Clifford Archive, 2024, pp. 244, paper, \$20.00).

Every book is an adventure, its title a seduction. Readers usually meet key characters in the first few pages and the arc of the narrative emerges slowly as the reader becomes familiar with each. But what if the reader encounters dozens of characters in the first hundred pages?

At the outset, I didn't understand whether I was reading a personal memoir, an autobiography, or a work of fiction. After a while, I gave up trying to keep track of the myriad characters introduced and decided to just follow the author wherever he took me. At times I felt lost in a sea of fascinating but not fully fledged native Vermont characters. Then I realized that all the people I was being introduced to had a higher purpose. Each was a reflection of the narrator's interest in them but also of an endless feedback loop of his sense of his own insignificance and ongoing failures . . . though he could never know why.

Slowly I came to understand that the underpinning of this book was not at all what I had thought.

The narrator's life force lies in his fascination with the people with whom he grows up, the people he meets in his adult life, and vicariously in the diaries and town and family archives he collects obsessively.

The power of this unusual but absorbing memoir lies in the pace at which it reveals the narrator's quest to understand his own youthful insignificance. Though confused at the outset, I never lost interest in his character's ruminations, even as I struggled to retain all the fleeting glimpses of the family and neighbors who inhabited his world and, in time, his archive.

Midpoint in the story, in his effort to understand his own spiraling sense of failure, he seeks psychiatric help, resulting in his being prescribed a course of medication that temporarily alleviates symptoms but does nothing to bring to light the underlying causes.

Whenever I was depressed, I never recognized my situation in clinical terms. I had no idea what that could mean for me. My problem was the recognition of my lack of worth. It was there for everyone to participate in. All they had to do was to look at me, speak to me, or hear me. I could do nothing right. I couldn't sleep" (p. 99).

Further on, the author buys into a belief that he is a sexual deviant. His awakening sexuality elicits behaviors he judges not normal, though they are perfectly normal for many.

Later on, based on his love and appreciation for the innocence and joy of children, he's deemed by neighbors and his few friends to be a deviant, though he isn't. He knows himself so poorly and judges himself so harshly that whatever negative gossip he hears about himself becomes his reality.

Much of the sheer power of this memoir lies in the fact that it isn't what it seems at the start. *In the Shadow of the Lonely Tree* slowly unravels—for author and reader—the genesis and reason for the protagonist's sense of failure.

At its core, it's a fascinating exposition of the destructive power of unremediated intergenerational trauma, which has given rise to the relatively new science of *epigenetics*—how environment and behavior affect the way genes work in passing on the physiological impact of emotional trauma to succeeding generations.

As the story unwinds, the author seeks out and ultimately discovers both his own genetic history and the sources of his trauma and comes to understand his belief in his own enduring failure.

The image of a "lonely tree" standing high on a hill looking down on open fields, buffeted by natural elements and the annual loss of its life-sustaining leaves, becomes the narrator's journey to self-understanding. And the tree persists.

To one who grew up in Lamoille County and lived among hill farmers and merchants in his early years, the vast array of characters and names tolled like church bells at dusk: Bushways, Hazens, Gadways, Newtons, Doubledays, Kenyons. I could match a real person to each.

Though unconventional in architecture, this is a very powerful book. My interest never waned as, with no idea of where I was being led, I followed the narrator's tale to the final epiphany that explains why his sense of himself is never allowed to bloom.

I recommend *In the Shadow of the Lonely Tree*. It is the story of a real person among us today with a deep love of rural people and their communities. He is a major archivist of the culture that many of us grew up in. And if you, like me, find yourself following the author through a dark and confusing wood, stay the course. What you will learn is very much worth it. For me, it brought to light some of the root causes of humanity's struggle to achieve a sense of well-being.

BILL SCHUBART

Bill Schubart (www.schubart.com) grew up in Morrisville and is a regular opinion columnist and writer of literary fiction. He is the author of Lila & Theron (2017).