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Deficiencies in Our Past

The writing of Vermont's history must be understood within the context of the time and place in which it was conceived.

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On the occasion of the Vermont Historical Society's one hundredth anniversary in 1938, John Spargo delivered an address in which he flouted convention by proposing to look forward rather than back and to prophesy how the two hundredth anniversary celebration might unfold. Consulting his crystal ball, Spargo announced that the speaker was "a sturdy and typical Vermonter," by the name of Ethan Allen Petrovsky. Petrovsky, obviously an elder in the fraternity of historians, commenced his address "by lamenting the passing of the Good Old Days and no less eloquently deploring the depravity of Nowadays." He next proceeded to "express great regret at the accumulated collections of uncatalogued manuscripts," lambasted his predecessors for their lack of foresight in having erected a ten-story building in 1888 that failed abysmally to properly anticipate the historical needs of researchers in 2038. Having thus absolved himself of any guilt for the sorry state of current research and writing, he retired from the podium, greeted by a polite, albeit half-hearted, round of applause. Thus came to a close, Spargo reported, this "dry occasion, as historical meetings proverbially are."¹

Petrovsky's performance is instructive, for the impulse to divorce oneself from the historiographical failures of the past and present is, within the heady atmosphere of a sesquicentennial celebration, naturally

compelling. The dangers of smugness, of course, rest in the obvious realization that historians who rebuke their elders will invariably suffer the same fate at the hands of their successors.

Can this censorious cycle be broken to permit productive reflections upon the “deficiencies of our past?” The key rests in our understanding that historiography—the writing of history—like history itself, must be understood within the context of the time and place in which it was conceived. To categorically impose one’s present-mindedness upon the past for self-congratulatory purposes is unjust, unproductive, and ahistorical. A more legitimate historical approach dictates that we consider a set of three broadly framed and, ideally, objective questions: How have Vermonters framed their past? Has the story line changed over time, either in terms of players selected or events highlighted? And finally, once identified, what do these alterations in the story say about historians’ ability to better understand the past? As will be seen from the selective historical chronicling that follows—of Vermont’s struggle for independence between the formation of the Green Mountain Boys and statehood in 1791—the value-laden term “better” has potential for evoking considerable discussion.

In 1846, Norwich University professor James Butler presented an address to the fledgling Vermont Historical Society, entitled “Deficiencies in Our Past.” Delivered scarcely three-quarters of a century after the formation of the Green Mountain Boys, and only fifty-five years after Vermont’s entry into the Union, Butler observed that Vermonters had demonstrated a “universal apathy” for preserving the state’s unique heritage. He reported that the papers of our first and most memorable governor were sold to a peddler with paper rags, maps captured at the battle of Bennington were “used as curtains until all, save one perished,” while the Vermont grenadiers’ arms and drum, also captured at Bennington and presented to Vermont’s Governor and Council as a trophy, have “been vilely thrown away.”²

Indifference to the past, Butler observed, could be explained by the maxim that “young nations live in hope rather than in memory.” But Butler’s Vermont in 1846 was no longer youthful and the passage of time dictated that the gaping historical voids be filled. Butler expended some twenty pages of his address elaborating upon the particular deficiencies deemed most offensive. All of his charges focus on the period between 1770 and 1791. First and foremost, he stated, Vermont’s controversy with New York had yet to be explained “on its merits,” which is to say, on moralistic grounds of good versus evil. The issue was not “merely about the price of land,” but was a contest “between New England and New York principles—those of the Puritan and of the Patroon.” The argument of Vermont’s moral imperative also came through in Butler’s ad-

dress when he castigated Vermont historians for permitting another state to claim responsibility for the Green Mountain Boys' victory over the British at Fort Ticonderoga, by implying — erroneously, he maintained — that the idea was hatched in Connecticut rather than by the fertile mind of Ethan Allen. Further efforts, Butler continued, were needed to absolve Allen of blame associated with his capture in Montreal — specifically, investigation into the question of John A. Brown's failure to arrive at the agreed upon moment — which might exonerate Allen of charges that the capture was attributable “solely to his own fool-hardiness.”³

Butler's claims that Vermonters were indifferent to their past falters in the face of two important accounts of Vermont's history written during the 1790s, Samuel Williams's *Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (1794) and Ira Allen's *Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont* (1798).⁴ Both works were written for audiences outside Vermont and, by Butler's definition, both were deficient. Allen's work, for example, acknowledged that Connecticut's revolutionary council, following the battle of Lexington, “sent Major Halsey and Noah Phelps to the New Hampshire Grants to request Col. Allen to raise the Green Mountain Boys to go and take the garrisons of Ticonderoga and Crown Point,” thereby planting the seed for Ethan's attack on Fort Ticonderoga.⁵

So, too, for Williams, the contest over the grants was not rooted in the particular actions of Ethan Allen but rather in what Thomas Paine referred to as the application of “innate good sense.” These were “hardy, intrepid but uncultivated men, without the advantages of education or any property other than what hard labor and hard living had procured [and] destitute of the conveniences and elegances of life.” To deny such people justice, Williams maintained, “was to prejudice and arm them against it, to confirm all their suspicions and prejudices against their rules, and to give them an excuse and plea to proceed to outrage, and violence.”⁶

The decision to challenge Yorker authority predated Ethan Allen's appearance upon the Grants. Indeed, Williams observed, Allen's contribution was relatively small, resting in the fact that he “wrote and dispersed several pamphlets to display the injustices and designs of the NY proceedings. *And so oppressive were these measures that although Allen was a very indifferent writer, his pamphlets were much read and regarded* [italics added]. The uncultivated roughness of his own temper and manners seems to have assisted him, in giving a just description of the views and proceedings; and where all was a scene of violence and abuse, such a method of writing, did not greatly differ from the feelings of the settlers.”⁷

A review of Williams's and Ira Allen's works invariably raises the question, why did these early writers display, by Butler's standards, such seeming contempt for Vermont's early history? The answer, of course, is that

they did not, but were, rather, addressing different circumstances operative during the era in which they wrote. The author's objective in each case did not rest in espousing the virtues of a great man but rather in demonstrating to European audiences the seemingly limitless capacity of enlightened Vermonters, animated by natural rights thinking, to convert philosophic ideals into a novel experiment in republicanism. Both Williams and Allen were committed to praising a revolutionary generation who, historian Catherine Albanese writes, had transformed themselves through the cataclysm of revolution from traditional "sons of the fathers" imprisoned by the past into "fathers" capable of altering the course of their destiny.⁸ Thus it is significant that both "histories" treat the past as a prelude to the present, portraying Vermont society in the 1790s as a land punctuated by egalitarian institutions and limitless opportunity.⁹

Shifting our focus back upon Butler, the question arises: how could he ignore Allen's and Williams's monumental works and assert that Vermont's history had yet to be written? His address must similarly be read in the setting of its times. Placed in the context of a new era, when Vermonters seduced by the "sheep craze's" promises of prosperity found themselves helplessly on the verge of financial collapse owing to the elimination of favorable tariffs and the plummeting price of wool, Butler was implicitly repudiating the position espoused by Samuel Williams and Ira Allen.¹⁰ Stripped of his faith that Vermonters control their own destiny, Butler sought refuge in the comforting filiopietistical confines of ancestor worship.

This phenomenon should not be viewed as unique to the writing of Vermont's history. The "great man" theory was simultaneously emerging at the national level, in the canonization of the "founding fathers." There were many purveyors of this genre during the mid-nineteenth century, the most studious and comprehensive being George Bancroft, in his multivolume work, *History of the United States*. Relying extensively upon biography to describe singularly endowed individuals functioning within extraordinary political and military events, Bancroft sustained his thesis that American liberty was unique, having been born of a revolutionary struggle.¹¹

The most familiar popularizer of the myth of the founding fathers was Parson Mason Weems's *A History of the Life, and Death, Virtues, and Exploits, of General George Washington* (1802), a work that unflinchingly abandoned historical accuracy to create a memorable narrative line.¹² Most noteworthy was Weems's invention of the famous cherry tree story, presented as follows: Staggering under the weight of his father's question, George, "with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-conquering truth, bravely cried out, 'I cannot tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie.'" For this, he is rewarded with his father's

call to "run into my arms; glad am I George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son, is more worth than a thousand trees though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold."¹³

Such historical inventions had a measurable effect. They erased the ambiguous aspects of the revolutionary players' lives, eliminating, for example, the military errors of Washington, and the vitriolic attacks launched against him as president.¹⁴ Also, by encasing Washington in reverential aura, Weems and Bancroft did what Samuel Williams and Ira Allen had done: herald the achievement of the revolutionary generation. But again, the context was new. Biography as a literary form emerged *after* the revolutionary generation has passed from the scene. With death silencing that generation's ability to passionately recount what the Revolution had meant to them, subsequent writers invented mythical heroes, who embodied all the traits integral to the revolutionary cause: the heroes' charisma, virtue, and courage afforded new generations unfamiliar with the events the means to learn both about and to cull from the past.

In Vermont, Zadock Thompson seemingly anticipated Butler's 1846 challenge by producing, during the 1830s, the first works of Vermont history designed for internal consumption. Clearly, his impulse bore remarkable similarity to the purveyors of the "national heroes" literature. Thompson sought "to awaken and perpetuate in the breasts of the young, that spirit of patriotism, independence, and self-denial, which so nobly animated the hearts of their fathers."¹⁵

In his chronicle, Thompson freely excerpted from Ethan Allen's own immodest account of his heroics contained within *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity*.¹⁶ The author's portrayal of Allen as a patriot imbued with an unyielding commitment to liberty closely resembled Allen's own self-serving portrait. Like Weems, Thompson jettisoned the ambiguities. The capture of Fort Ticonderoga became an incomparable success against a seemingly invincible foe. Excised from Thompson's story are the missteps — Allen's failure to arrange for boats; the troops' three-day alcoholic binge following seizure of Ticonderoga's liquor supply, a celebration that permitted Benedict Arnold rather than Allen to gain the upper hand in capturing the British fleet at St. John; and the routing of Allen's men later within St. John, leading to the appointment of Seth Warner to lead the Green Mountain Boys. Thompson's Ethan Allen appeared to his readers to be a military genius, forthright in his resolve to keep his varied opponents (including, at times, the Continental Congress) at bay.¹⁷ Thompson's rendition of the revolutionary mythology became a standard for numerous subsequent popular histories, including Rowland E. Robinson's 1892 work, *Vermont: A Study of Independence*, Lafayette Wilbur's *Early History of*

Vermont, published at the turn of the century, and Walter Crockett's *Vermont: The Green Mountain State*, published in the 1920s.¹⁸

A second dimension of the Ethan Allen myth emerged during the 1850s and 1860s. Again, it originated in the context of a changing Vermont and, as with the histories of Samuel Williams and Ira Allen, the impulse driving the new historiography originated *outside* the borders of Vermont. The early nineteenth-century Romantic Movement in the United States, embodied in the paintings of Thomas Cole and Jasper Cropsey of the Hudson River school, and in literature by William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, introduced the image of the frontier as a major influence shaping the American identity. These writers and artists planted in their works the recurring theme that the senseless destruction of the wilderness threatened to undermine American virtue and freedoms.¹⁹ Cooper's Leatherstocking series depicts the wanton destruction of upstate New York's natural environment by white speculators and entrepreneurs. In *Walden*, the Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau argued that his retreat into the wilderness made possible his discernment of "powers, abilities and senses" that in cultivated society had remained dormant. Thoreau wrote, "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf; that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in."²⁰

Perhaps the best comparison with Allen in this historical context can be drawn with the mythicizing of Daniel Boone. Originally propagated by Boone's partner in land speculations, John Filson, in a piece entitled *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*, the Boone myth was part of an ingenious sales pitch aimed at easterners and Europeans. The logic was simple: Boone, residing in the civilized environs of America's east coast, was a fish out of water. Only when transported to the wilds of the frontier — which Filson likened, on varying occasions, to a tropical paradise with its palms and other fauna, and a jungle replete with wild animals — was Boone able to fully utilize his abilities, as he outwitted Indians, wrestled bears, and secured the region for future white settlement.²¹

It is this literature of the archetypal frontiersman that next transformed the image of Ethan Allen in Vermont's history. For in a new Victorian Vermont — a Vermont whose very essence was being recast by the railroad, denuding the state's cherished forests, inducing new waves of Irish immigrants, and introducing varied forms of industry and urbanization — the Romantic Movement had extraordinary power.²²

Several illustrations underscore the strength and vitality of the frontier

myth. In 1855, Henry DePuy published a biography of Ethan Allen, aptly entitled *Mountain Hero*. For DePuy, the cause of patriotism remained critical, but his work was also the "story of the perils, sufferings, and self-sacrificing heroism" of a free spirit who discovered his hidden strength when transported to the frontier. Contrasted with Ira's modest portrait of his brother, DePuy's hero was "the champion of that resolute band of husbandmen who first planted themselves in the wilderness of the Green Mountains."²³

Later in the century, this image was powerfully transmitted in Rowland Robinson's *Vermont: A Study of Independence*. According to Robinson, "pioneers" enduring the hardships of "Backwoods life" rallied around Ethan Allen, whose "rude eloquence was of the sort to fire the hearts of the uncultivated backwoodsmen . . . when harangu[ing] them from the stump of a clearing" or engaging in hearty good-fellowship. Not content merely to romanticize about the exploits of Allen and his cohorts, Robinson devoted the final seventy-five pages of his history mourning the demise of quaint "old-time customs" practiced by Vermonters during this earlier era.²⁴

The romantic imagery did not weaken with the turn of the twentieth century. Dramatic alterations in Vermont's landscape, punctuated by crisscrossing roads, telephone and electric wires, fanned the fires of nostalgic imagination in recalling the rule of nature and natural men. The most popular purveyor of historical romanticism in the twentieth century was Frederic F. Van de Water, whose literary prowess for transforming Vermont's history into a tale of swashbuckling adventure was illustrated in his 1941 work, *The Reluctant Republic, Vermont 1724-1791*. Remarkably, Van de Water chose to make the setting both alluring and dangerous: The trees of Vermont's primeval forests "stood shoulder to shoulder, great trunks soaring branchless a hundred feet or more to spread at last an unbroken room of foliage that summoned the rain and held moisture beneath its canopy."²⁵ In this context Van de Water, using the artistic license of a fine storyteller, contrasted the arch-enemy, New York governor Cadwallader Colden, an "ascetic, irascible intellectual . . . with high sloping forehead, eyes heavily browed, a domineering nose, and a small intemperate mouth" with the hero Allen, "his six feet two inches of height. . . [giving him] the stature of the demigod, so wholly racial, so typical of his people. . ."²⁶

The recasting of Ethan Allen, from member of the revolutionary generation to founding father and frontier rebel during the 1840s-1850s, an identity sustained within popular histories throughout the succeeding century and a half, underscores the propensity to substitute mythology for fact. In a time of dramatic and unalterable change to the landscape

and the population, residents sought refuge in the comforting setting of a mythical past. Even today, amidst continuing cultural and physical upheaval, these interpretations continue to retain tremendous appeal.

The glorification of Ethan Allen ushered in a dramatically new definition of what constituted Vermont history. For in choosing to employ certain conventions, historians implicitly defined what *was not* history. That is, in answering Butler's call for filiopietistic reverence, subsequent generations of Vermont historians in effect changed the record of Vermont's past.

Some individuals were simply ruled out. An obvious population of revolutionary inhabitants who fell victim to the historian's pen were those whose misfortune it was to be on the losing side: loyalists. How large was this population? Who were they and where did they reside? What were their motives? The answer in most instances remains buried. Except for Justus Sherwood and his secret meetings with the Allens during the Haldimand negotiations, the Tories were expunged from the revolutionary record.²⁷

The dehumanization of enemies is not unique to the writing of Vermont. More interesting, then, is the systematic excision of patriots, persons instrumental in the shaping of Vermont, whose shared transgression rested in their vocal opposition to the Allens. Nathaniel Chipman's fall into historical oblivion provides an example of how the historical record has been skewed. Chipman was undoubtedly the person most responsible for orchestrating statehood, first through his correspondence with Alexander Hamilton to negotiate an end to New York's persistent title claims and subsequently as an influential lobbyist for the cause. Yet Chipman was a member of a group Aleine Austin refers to as the "rival leadership," arch-enemies of the Allens and the "Bennington junta," whose increasing clout within Vermont's legislature, exhibited during the 1780s in resolving the betterments and tender issues, afforded them the means to circumvent Governor Thomas Chittenden's stall tactics and force the issue of statehood to its ultimate completion.²⁸

Zadock Thompson's discussion of Chipman in his 1842 *History of Vermont* illustrates his fate at the hands of historians. Maintaining that statehood was the logical result of actions taken two decades earlier by the Allens and Chittenden, Thompson characterized Chipman's role, in a one-sentence acknowledgement, as essentially that of messenger boy who carried the Vermont Constitutional Convention's request for admission into the union to the Congress. No other mention is made of his contributions.²⁹

Thompson's story line guided later historical accounts. With two notable exceptions that describe Chipman's career — an 1898 text written by Edward Conant for elementary school children and an intriguing book

of biographies of famous Vermonters published in the 1930s and edited by Walter Crockett—Chipman's fate had been sealed as a minor, if not wholly inconsequential player, in the events leading to statehood.³⁰ Several other prominent figures shared a similar fate. Stephen Rowe Bradley, Isaac Tichenor, and Moses Robinson were key political figures during the 1780s, yet have been relegated to historical oblivion. All had been arch-enemies of the Allens.

The propensity of Vermont historians to treat Ethan Allen as the epitome of Vermont's revolutionary generation contributed to an impression that Vermont's past was altogether unique. Writing in *Vermont History* during World War II, State Supervisor of High Schools John Huden protested that self-flattering impression. Huden argued that the teaching of Vermont history needed to be recast, to jettison the traditional "pietistic platitudes" associated with local histories in favor of a better understanding of broader regional influences shaping Vermont's development. A regional approach, he observed, "would tend to stimulate a healthy accumulation of unified, interlocking regional manuscripts which would in time close the gaps in Vermont's history and in addition show Vermont's real place in the growth of New England and the nation."³¹

Two outstanding historical monographs, published by New York historians, one in mid-nineteenth and the other in mid-twentieth century, attempted to recast Vermont's early history by looking beyond Ethan Allen and reflecting upon broader regional influences. Benjamin Hall's *History of Eastern Vermont*, published in 1857, documented activities transpiring in southeastern Vermont between 1770 and 1775. Hall demonstrated that while Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys functioned with impunity in the southwest, the vast majority of residents in the southeast, Vermont's most populous region, sought to disassociate themselves from his cause. Both in the Chester Riot of 1770 and the Putney Riot three years later, these residents signed a petition addressed to the king begging that he not view the actions of southeastern anti-court protesters seeking to shut down New York's courts as representing anything more than the misguided views of a small band of "disorderly rioters."³² Hall documents their conservatism in his record of their repeated efforts to obtain New York confirmation titles. The image of one Vermont united behind the leadership of Ethan Allen ignores deep-seated regional differences.

The other study by a New York historian, Irving Mark's *Agrarian Conflicts in Colonial New York*, focused upon New York's Anti-Rent Wars, which involved a rebellion by tenant farmers against the great manorial lords, Robert Livingston and Henry Van Rensselaer, in an effort to throw off the repressive bonds imposed upon them. Confronted by New York

sheriffs and posses numbering fewer than two hundred men—the same opposition that later would confront the Allens—these courageous farmers organized themselves into an extralegal fighting force. They devised a combination defensive-and-offensive strategy by assembling heavily armed farmers to counteract eviction by a posse, and systematically evicting adversaries from their land or wreaking havoc with the lords' industrial interests. The strategy bore remarkable similarity to that chosen by Ethan Allen in the formation of the Green Mountain Boys. Mark attributes the similarity to Allen's having lived in Salisbury, Connecticut, in close proximity to the area of turmoil, when the events occurred.³³ With the exception of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Vermont Tradition*, which develops this point, Vermont historians have ignored the ramifications, and, in so doing, communicated to succeeding generations of students an unwillingness to tamper with Allen's claims of original genius and invention.³⁴

Vermont's popular historians during the nineteenth century conceived a history that served their particular needs, but to what extent have more recent academic historians succeeded in addressing deficiencies in the writing of the state's history? If the origins of academic history may be traced to the organization of the American Historical Association in 1884, the verity of the old adage that Vermont is fifty years behind the time is readily demonstrated. While nationally prominent figures including Henry and Brooks Adams were employing scientific formulas such as the second law of thermodynamics to develop a science of history at the turn of the century, and the great Progressives Frederic Jackson Turner and Charles Beard were rejecting traditional views that New England promulgated democratic systems and constitutional framers were governed by pure selflessness, Vermont's history remained comfortably entrenched in its filiopietistical shell. The publication of Lafayette Wilbur's popular *Ira Allen* and articles in the Vermont Historical Society's *Proceedings*, such as "The Life of Redfield Proctor" in which Proctor is described as "typical of the rugged strength of our mountain state," suggest that old formulas were employed to create quintessential new heroes.³⁵

Still, the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s saw the publication of several pivotal works, most of which originated as doctoral dissertations completed outside the state. Genieve Lamson's "Geographic Influences in the Early History of Vermont" (1924) and Florence May Woodard's *Town Proprietors in Vermont* (1936) reinforced Benjamin Hall's claims that eastern and western Vermont towns were substantially different entities. Lamson's study of migration patterns revealed that frontiersmen from western Massachusetts and Connecticut were most likely to settle in southwestern Vermont, while Woodard's examination of Windsor to the

east indicated a conscious effort by its settlers to replicate the traditional New England compact nucleated village, replete with its church and its allegiance to what orthodox Connecticut clergyman Timothy Dwight characterized as "steady habits."³⁶ David Ludlum's *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (1939) and Lewis Stilwell's *Migration From Vermont* (1948) connected developments in the late eighteenth century with larger regional and national influences, explaining how the bombastic rhetoric of a deistical Ethan Allen was supplanted by the placid, conservative, law-abiding Vermont farmer, through the conversion of some to religious orthodoxy and the exodus of still others to new and more promising frontiers.³⁷

The mythology of Ethan Allen and Vermont's founding fathers was not designated off limits to revisionists in the 1930s and 1940s. Henry Wardner was the first to challenge the generous interpretation of the Haldimand negotiations propagated originally by the Allens themselves. While conceding that the Allens may have undertaken negotiations originally as a "ruse" to pressure the Continental Congress to recognize Vermont's independence, Wardner maintained that Ira's signature on a 1781 agreement nullified that position. With Haldimand's dispatch of the St. Leger expedition threatening to conquer Vermont, and Ira and Ethan promising to lobby the Vermont legislature to accept the terms of surrender that Ira had secretly negotiated, Wardner labeled the Allens dynamic accessories in the ill-fated attack.³⁸ So, too, Matt Jones's detailed analysis of the Allen's speculative real estate holdings suggested the early struggles of the Green Mountain Boys with Yorkers were reducible to a contest between two opposing groups of land speculators, the element of morality being merely a convenient smokescreen to arouse sympathies and potential support.³⁹

Even more damning of the Allens was Chilton Williamson's 1949 work, *Vermont in Quandary 1763-1825*. Building on Wardner's suspicions and his own discovery of an extensive cache of hitherto unexamined documents in the vaults of British archives, Williamson argued that both Ethan and Ira persisted in their negotiations throughout the 1780s, long after fears of Vermont's demise at the hands of the Continental Congress had subsided. Thus, Williamson concluded, self-interest associated with protecting their Onion River properties placed the Allens outside the movement for statehood.⁴⁰

The challenges posed by Williamson, Wardner, and others laid the foundation for an explosion of revisionist historical writing on Vermont subjects during the 1960s and 1970s. This development was part of a national phenomenon, and the accompanying "revolution in methodological awareness" resulted in a proliferation of new approaches, ranging from

the new social history, psychohistory, urban studies, community studies, feminist studies, oral history, comparative history, and quantitative social-scientific history.⁴¹ The study of Vermont's history has benefitted both in terms of the increased numbers of interested students and the varied methodologies they have brought to bear. Of the collection of articles and significant works included in H. Nicholas Muller III and Samuel B. Hand's *In a State of Nature* (1982), fully three-quarters of the works were produced after 1970.⁴²

A perusal of the pages of *Vermont History* during the past two decades reveals the vitality of revisionism within Vermont. The influences of the new social history, dedicated to uncovering the hidden past of both common peoples and common experiences, has been most pronounced. For example, women's studies has been nurtured by Deborah Clifford, Faith Pepe, Thomas Dublin, Margaret Nelson, and others. Native Americans, in the works of Colin Calloway and Gordon Day, have entered the mainstream of Vermont history as have immigrant groups, illuminated through the use of community study, as in the case of Betsy Beattie for the French-Canadians and Gene Sessions on the Irish. Quantitative analysis, best exemplified by recent works by William J. Gilmore and Randolph Roth, have similarly opened our eyes to changing educational, social, and religious behaviors over time. Contributions in historic preservation have come from Jan Lewandoski, Stewart McHenry, and the University of Vermont's Historic Preservation program. Historians of the Vermont experience have increasingly "listened to the inarticulate" as well as to those whose literate skills afford us traditional written resources.⁴³

The answer to the question, "Are we producing better history?" is a definite yes. Though not having approached our depth of knowledge of the Puritans, whom, Edmund Morgan once suggested, we know better than they knew themselves, Vermont historians have come a good distance in rediscovering a forgotten past.

Still, the recent gains in historical research and writing have created a new cause for concern. Richard Hofstadter observed in 1968 that the "rediscovery of complexity in American history" has substituted for the "engaging and moving simplicity, accessible to the casual reader of history . . . a new awareness of the multiplicity of forces," understood, if at all, by only the most diligent of professionals.⁴⁴ In Vermont as throughout the nation, the explosion of writing on myriad subjects has not been matched by efforts to integrate that history into a cohesive or comprehensive whole. Though our knowledge base has increased manifold, the hard reality is that this knowledge is all too frequently indigestible by those for whom history is an avocation rather than a salaried vocation.

Nowhere is the chasm more evident than within our public schools. Pedantry demanded at the collegiate level has led to a decline in influence by professional historians in the formulation of texts. Increasingly, book companies form editorial staffs whose commitment to historical accuracy is tempered by financial considerations. Viewing the situation in national terms, Frances Fitzgerald, in *America Revised*, suggested the crisis within the schools could be directly traced to a format that emphasizes diversity at the expense of interpretation. Current high school texts, she observed, yield little more than a multitude of vignettes, forming "a patchwork of rich and poor, old and young, men and women, blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Indians." Recited as little more than a litany of problems, Fitzgerald concluded "the past is no highway to the present; it is a collection of issues and events that do not fit together and that lead in no single direction." Thus, the student is left to conclude that "history is proceeding in spite of us."⁴⁵

Vermont historical writing has not reached this level of absurdity; nevertheless, Vermont historians have been far too myopic in their dedication to repudiate the mythology forged by their elders without seeking to substitute a coherent alternative. Most recent scholarship on Vermont is virtually unknown to middle and high school teachers and, in those instances where works are made available, teachers justly complain that it is impossible to discern the overarching themes or influences that link them. In winning the war against a past that never was, Vermont historians are in danger of substituting a past that is inaccessible and incomprehensible. Small wonder, then, that many students parrot the words of Henry Ford, in denouncing history as "more or less bunk," or the philosopher Martin Heidegger's brutal comment that history exists only in the mind of the historian.⁴⁶

On the national level, historians are newly engaged in frank discussions over the issue of whether history is relevant in an era when the sheer pace at which changes are occurring prompts enormous skepticism about the value and meaning of the past. Vermont historians must similarly engage in careful self-scrutiny to formulate a coherent strategy for demonstrating the validity of their methods and findings.

The deficiencies of our present are not those identified by our predecessors. We cannot, as did James Butler in 1846, identify a series of easily enumerated shortcomings that afford a simple and certain blueprint for assembling a definitive history of Vermont's past. Rather, students of Vermont history must join historians and scholars to open new lines of communication between those who say they understand the past and those who do not remember and, collectively, search for meaning in a past now devoid of simple answers.

NOTES

¹ John Spargo, "The Vermont Historical Society in 2038 A.D.," *Vermont History* 8 (March 1938): 31-36.

² James D. Butler, *Deficiencies in Our History: An Address Delivered Before the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society at Montpelier, October 16, 1846* (Montpelier: Eastman and Danforth, 1846), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

⁴ Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Walpole, N.H., 1794); Ira Allen, *The Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont* (London: J. W. Myers, 1798).

⁵ Allen, *History*, 42.

⁶ Williams, *History*, 218-19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 219-20.

⁸ Catherine Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976).

⁹ Williams boasted—quite inaccurately—that education was "common and universal in every part of the state"; so, too, he insisted that "the nearest equality that ever can take place among men" could be found in the "new country" of Vermont. See Williams, *History*, 324-29. Ira Allen concluded his history with the observation, "were that all mankind were as happy this minute as the Vermontese." See Allen, *History*, 166.

¹⁰ Randolph Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 220-98.

¹¹ George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1859-1876), 10 vols.

¹² Mason Weems, *A History, of the Life and Death, Virtues, and Exploits, of General George Washington* (Shepard Kollock, 1802).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12-13; for an excellent discussion of Weems's motives, see Nicholas Cords, "Parson Weems, the Cherry Tree, and the Patriotic Tradition," in Nicholas Cords, ed., *Myth and the American Experience* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1973), 157.

¹⁴ The transformation of George Washington from military commander to "founding father," and, as Catherine Albanese describes him, as "America's tribal totem," is discussed in Albanese, *Sons*, 143-81. Also see James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980); and Bernard Mayo's classic work, *Myths and Men: Patrick Henry, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

¹⁵ Zadock Thomson, *History of the State of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt.: Edward Smith, 1833), 3-4.

¹⁶ Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1779). Given Allen's propensity for verbal exaggeration, the accuracy of Allen's *Narrative* has been recently questioned. See P. Jeffrey Potash, "Fact or Fiction? An Irreverent Review of a Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity," *Vermont Bicentennial*, Vermont Statehood Bicentennial Committee, vol. 1, no. 4 (Spring 1989): 4; for a broader discussion of the captivity narrative, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

¹⁷ The most balanced account of Allen's campaign, replete with errors, appears in Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 102-20.

¹⁸ J. Kevin Graffagnino, in his historiographical essay, points out the remarkable similarity between Thompson's account and later popular histories. See J. Kevin Graffagnino, "The Vermont Story: Continuity and Change in Vermont Historiography," *Vermont History* 46 (Spring 1978): 83. Also, see Rowland Robinson, *Vermont: A Study of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892); Lafayette Wilbur, *Early History of Vermont* (Jericho, Vt.: Roscoe Printing House, 1899-1903), 4 vols.; Walter Crockett, *Vermont, The Green Mountain State* (New York: The Century History Co., 1921), 5 vols.

¹⁹ Two excellent studies of the romantic movement appear in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 44-83; and Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), 59-89.

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884-1893), 11 volumes, II: 9-11.

²¹ John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (Wilmington, Del., 1784).

²² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Excellent discussions on Victorian Vermont appear in Kevin Graffagnino, *Vermont in the Victorian Age: Continuity and Change in the Green Mountain State 1850-1900* (Bennington, Vt.: Vt. Heritage Press, 1985); and H. Nicholas Muller, III, "From Ferment to Fatigue? 1870-1900: A New Look at the Neglected Winter of Vermont," *Occasional Paper*, Center for Research on Vermont, 1984.

²³ Henry Depuy, *Mountain Hero* (Boston: Dayton and Wentworth, 1855), 129.

²⁴ Rowland Robinson, *Vermont: A Study in Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 68-69.

²⁵ Frederic Van de Water, *The Reluctant Republic, Vermont 1724-1791* (Taftsville, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1974), 4-5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 60-61.

²⁷ The only Vermont Tory who seemingly has escaped the ranks of historical oblivion is former Green Mountain Boy Justus Sherwood. The best work here is Ian C. Pemberton, "Justus Sherwood, Vermont Loyalist, 1747-1798," (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1972). Sherwood is also the subject of a children's book published in Canada. See Mary Beacock Fryer, *Buckskin Pimpernel: The Exploits of Justus Sherwood, Loyalist Spy* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1981).

²⁸ Samuel B. Hand and P. Jeffrey Potash, "Nathaniel Chipman: Vermont's Forgotten Father," in Michael Sherman, ed., *A More Perfect Union* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1991), 52-78; a discussion of the economic issues of the 1780s appears in Aline Austin, "Vermont Politics in the 1780s: The Emergence of Rival Leadership," *Vermont History* 42 (Spring 1974): 142-49.

²⁹ Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt.: C. Goodrich, 1842), 82-83.

³⁰ Edward Conant, *Vermont Historical Reader For Primary Schools* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle & Co., 1895), 104; John Spargo offered a most interesting biographical thumbnail sketch, observing "There is little glamor or romance in the story of Nathaniel Chipman. His name evokes the respectful homage which is the just tribute to distinguished service, but it never evokes the enthusiasm which is the tribute to heroic or romantic deeds. Respect and a full measure of admiration were his during the greater part of his life, but it is probable that nobody outside of his immediate family circle ever enthused over him." See *Vermonters: A Book of Biographies* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Steven Daye Press, 1932), 36.

³¹ John Huden, "American History in the Schools and Colleges," *Vermont History* 12 (January 1944): 20-27. Intriguingly, the same issue contains a brief statement by Vermont governor William Wills extolling the importance of teaching history in wartime insofar as "we are fighting now to defend those customs, laws, and institutions which constitute our history." See Governor William Wills, "The Importance of History in Wartime," *Vermont History* 12 (January 1944): 4.

³² Benjamin Hall, *History of Eastern Vermont* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1857), 551-52.

³³ Irving Mark, *Agrarian Conflicts in Colonial New York* (Port Washington, N.Y.: I. J. Friedman, 1965).

³⁴ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1953), 88-125.

³⁵ Wilbur describes his history as "rich in heroic history." See Lafayette Wilbur, *Early History of Vermont* (Jericho, Vt.: Roscoe Printing House, 1899), 166; Frank Charles Partridge, "The Life of Redfield Proctor," *Vermont Historical Society Proceedings 1913-15* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1915), 59-104.

³⁶ Genieve Lamson, "Geographic Influences in the Early History of Vermont" *Vermont Historical Society Proceedings, 1921-23* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1924), 75-138; Florence May Woodard, *The Town Proprietors in Vermont* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Rev. Timothy Dwight, *Travels Through New England and New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1821), II, 459.

³⁷ David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Lewis Stilwell, *Migration From Vermont* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1948).

³⁸ Henry Wardner, "The Haldimand Negotiations," *Vermont History* 11 (March 1931): 22-26.

³⁹ Matt Jones, *Vermont in the Making, 1750-1777* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

⁴⁰ Chilton Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary, 1763-1825* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1949).

⁴¹ Michael Kammen, "The Historian's Vocation and the State of the Discussion in the United States," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 19-48.

⁴² H. Nicholas Muller, III, and Samuel B. Hand, eds., *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1982).

⁴³ Jesse Lemisch, "Listening to the Inarticulate," *Journal of Social History* 11 (Fall 1969): 1-29.

⁴⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 442.

⁴⁵ Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1979), 10.

⁴⁶ See Steven Vaughn, "History: Is It Relevant?," in Vaughn, ed., *The Vital Past* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 2.