

Review

Mount Desert: A History

By George E. Street, ed. Samuel A. Eliot

(Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1905; reprinted Higginson Book Co., Derby Square, Salem, Mass. 1970. xvi, 370 pp).

This book, now nearly a century old, is the first published history of Mount Desert Island and still the standard work for the period it covers. The volume has long been out of print; copies of an original edition have grown tattered at the edges and loose at the binding. The publisher of this reprint edition therefore deserves thanks for restoring the work to print.

Mount Desert: A History owes its existence to the labors of two men who loved Mount Desert Island. George E. Street, the elder of the two, was a Congregational minister from Connecticut who summered at Southwest Harbor. Samuel A. Eliot was a Unitarian minister from Massachusetts who summered at Northeast Harbor. When Street died in 1903, leaving the project unfinished, his family asked Eliot to complete the task and handed over to him Street's materials. These apparently included certain chapters composed by Street as well as papers or documents by other writers that he had collected. Most of the contributors were island residents whose names the footnotes honor.

Eliot's preface states that he made "a continuous historical narrative" from these materials. But this was self-effacing, for evidence strongly suggests that he was not only the book's editor it but its co-author. It is clear, for example, that portions of the early chapters were borrowed from an article he wrote for the *New England Magazine* of 1898. Eliot also provided a thorough and still serviceable bibliography. The exact division of labor cannot now be determined; in any case, there is more than ample credit to go round.

The first five of nine chapters run from the period of exploration and discovery to the earliest permanent settlements in 1760s. Chapters follow on "Townships," "Churches," "Social and industrial Conditions," and, finally, "The Summer Colonies."

The book has a dual character, possibly attributable to its divided authorship. The older history breathes a spirit of heroic romance. Eliot (in language taken from his article) wanted readers to feel, as he did, "the charm in the records of our own historic past which is as entrancing as any annals of mankind." He deplored the tendency to "make our history the record of merely material advance," where "the noise of the axe and hammer drowns out the

poetry." He was enchanted by the "romantic story of the exploration of our hundred-harbored New England shore."

By contrast, the story of settlement and the account of "social and industrial conditions" focus on the realities of the common life. "The warp and woof of history are in the daily doings of average people," clearing and planting fields, catching fish, raising families, building schools and churches, holding town meetings. In the lives of Mount Desert's people, Street and/or Eliot saw a different kind of heroism, not made to charm or to entrance, but rock-solid and durable, and not at all disconnected from material contexts and aims.

Reading *Mount Desert*, we are well aware that the book was made by two men "from away," observant, decent, thoughtful men. How local people might have told the story we cannot be sure but may surmise from the generous sharing, by island-born-and-bred men and women, of their stores of memory and knowledge. The recollections on such as Eben M. Hamor, Oliver H. Fernald, and Ezra A. Dodge root history in time and place; they show the grain of life as it was lived.

Take, for one example only, Hamor's account of carrying the mail on horseback once a week from the Narrows to Southwest Harbor and back via Eden, Town Hill, and Somesville. The round trip took the better part of two days, for a dollar a trip. The year was 1836; Hamor was just fourteen. He vividly describes the route, ("over Beech Hill and across the mountains to the head of Norwood's Cove"), the places (Somesville was a busy village with small store, one blacksmith shop, one shoemaker's shop, one tan yard, two ship yards, one bark mill, one saw mill, one lath mill, one shingle mill, one grist mill, and one school house"), and the people ("I distinctly remember old Uncle Abraham and Uncle John Somes and how they tended the grist mill by turns, one tending one week, the other the next; with their long coats and hats all covered with meal and flour. They appeared to me as very venerable men"). When Hamor wrote these words, he was pretty venerable himself. From this old man's memory of old men and past times one gets a deep sense of the rich layering of historical time, of human experience, of the presence of the past.

The last chapter, almost certainly by Eliot, looks at "The Summer Colonies," then barely forty years in existence but already working a revolution in the island's life. Here Eliot used the Mount Desert experience to describe a law of "development of popular summer resorts on the New England coast" --from early farmhouse boarding to small household hotels to the proliferation of cottagers and ever-larger hotels, with expansion of facilities serving the summer trade.

Eliot believed that "the summer business" rescued the island from economic decline in the later nineteenth century. But he was already worrying, in 1905, about issues of human ecology:

The complete occupation of the shores by private owners, the introduction of electric railroads or of automobiles, the reckless cutting off of the woods, the disfigurement of the roadsides by telegraph poles or ugly scars or piles of rubbish, the multiplication of city sights and sounds...are all to be avoided.

A century later, we in our turn may worry about--and even try to do something about--such things as the provision of affordable housing and year-round work, the management of tourism, the threat of jets on island ponds, the question of where to stash the trash, commercialization on the cheap, and so forth.

Eliot ended *Mount Desert: A History* with a quotation from his father, Charles W. Eliot, a "pioneer cottager" who was just then developing, with like-minded men, a major response to the kinds of questions his son identified. "The whole island," wrote Eliot senior, "ought to be treated by every resident and by the body of voters as if it were a public park." The Age of Acadia was about to dawn, bringing fresh challenges and opportunities.

Good as it is to have Street/Eliot in print again, one must contest the publisher's decision to reprint this particular edition, which is neither the latest nor the best. Some twenty years later, Eliot revised the book, amending errors, trimming excessive detail, and bringing the account up to date with special reference to the founding of the national park. Not only is this 1926 edition superior to its predecessor, but it is very scarce. For both reasons, it would have been the better choice. Further, the publisher chose to cover the book in funereal black and to print an inaccurate title on the spine-- "History of Mount Desert 1905"--without the names of either Street or Eliot. The text has reproduced well, many of the illustrations have not.

Still, these caveats noted, the reappearance of *Mount Desert: A History* is a welcome event. By perusing it, visitors, summer people, and residents will all enhance their experience of the island and deepen their appreciation of its remarkable history, romance and reality alike.

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Note: The book is available for purchase at the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.