

## Review

### *The Story of Mount Desert Island*

By Samuel Eliot Morison

(Frenchboro, Maine: Islandport Press, Inc., 2001; originally printed Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960. xii, 116 pp).

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Islandport Press of Frenchboro, Maine, has done everyone a great favor in reprinting Samuel Eliot Morison's *The Story of Mount Desert Island*, first published in 1960 and unavailable for some time now. It is not simply another facsimile edition: the type has been reset, a preface and an afterword have been added, and a number of vintage photographs now accompany the text.

In her introduction, Emily Morison Beck, the author's daughter, tells of how her father developed his "everlasting love of the sea and ships" while sailing as a boy off Mount Desert Island. This early experience explains two key features of his "story": the especially thorough coverage of the shipping/steamboat/sailing history of the region and the marvelous sense of orientation, only possible from someone who knows the waters, the charts, and the coastline intimately.

Beck also paints a picture of a man who came to love an island through camping and climbing. Sargent Mountain, she writes, "was perhaps his favorite, and he would take his offspring and their friends up the Giant Slide Trail, stopping for a dip in Sargent Pond at the top." To this day, this particular hike and dip remain a favorite among those of us who are willing to go a distance for visual and freshwater sustenance.

One of this country's preeminent historians, Morison didn't call this book a history, and for good reason: it is truly a story, with all the charm of a storyteller's account. It is not surprising to learn that the text is

based on lectures prepared for island library presentations: the narrative is robust with the kinds of anecdotes and amusing asides that would have left the audience in stitches. Indeed, at times Morison approaches a “Bert and I” kind of humor (as in the two conversations recounted on page 56) or the tall tale sensibility of Jones Tracy, the Mount Desert Island storyteller.<sup>1</sup>

The story starts off with a somewhat odd vision: “The first European,” writes Morison, “saw the hills of Mount Desert arise like blue bubbles from the sea.” It recalls that somewhat more fanciful image in Rachel Field’s *Calico Bush*, when the bound-out French girl Marguerite first glimpses the island, “like dim, blue monsters swimming away from land.”<sup>2</sup>

This seaborne perspective was the proper one to start with as concerns colonizers—many of them arrived by water—but Morison quickly acknowledged earlier islanders, the Indians, who came by inland routes. As Gregory Pfitzer notes in his afterword, this portion of the story displays a “vexing casualness.” One example: the Red Paint People, Morison tells us, earned their name “because they were highly addicted to make-up.”

According to Pfitzer, “Some professional scholars found such provocative statements irresponsible, arguing that they fed the negative stereotypes of Native-Americans.” Certainly, such colorful remarks are more provocative today than they were in 1960 (that may have been the last year you could have gotten away with them). With the opening of the new Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor this fall, one can expect the history of this first island culture to be clarified, even, in some cases, rectified.<sup>3</sup>

Morison displays a sharp wit in dealing with amateurs. “Credulous people are said to be searching here [on Mount Desert Island] with Geiger counters for the grave of Leif Ericson,” he writes, “which will give them plenty of exercise and do no harm.” He even applies his breezy style to the first European “whom [sic] we positively know saw Mount Desert

Island,” one Estevan Gomes, a Portuguese whom Morison refers to as Steve Smith. “When he hit the Penobscot River, which he called Rio de la Gamas (River of the Deer),” we read, “Steve thought he had it [a northern Panama] and sailed up to the site of Bangor, where he decided he hadn’t...”

The origin of the word Acadia is explored. “La Cadie,” Morison states, was “the French version for an Indian name meaning ‘The Place.’” The derivation offered in *Concise Dictionary of American History* is less confident: The name Acadia may have been of European origin, write the authors, “or a derivative of the Indian word Aquoddiake.”<sup>4</sup>

Whatever its true derivation, the name Acadia stuck, with no question as to pronunciation. By contrast, the “desert” in Mount Desert, Morison explains in a witty footnote, is pronounced differently according to which camp you fall into, “the Sahara School” or the “Ice Cream and Cake School.” In another section, he insists that Eggemoggin be pronounced as it was originally spelled, “Edgemogin.”

Morison loved to follow tangents if it meant entertaining his listeners and readers. One amusing instance lies in his account of Henry IV’s unsuccessful pursuit of Antoinette de Pons, who founded an early short-lived colony on Mount Desert. One can picture Admiral Morison acting out the parts of the mad-with-desire king and the firmly single Madame la Marquise.

Morison’s devotion to Mount Desert Island sometimes led to outright advocacy. He bemoaned, for example, the unfortunate disappearance of the name “The Harbor of Mount Desert” and called for it to be revived and placed on maps of the area. He also offered lessons in comportment, as in this handsome passage:

I hope that we summer visitors from heavily populated regions, where courtesy and friendliness have been almost crowded out, may absorb something of those human qualities which, over and above the magnificent scenery, make Mount Desert to me, after almost seventy summers, still fresh, exciting, and a blessed country.

Like a good tour guide, Morison pointed out landmarks on and off the island. He noted that in the town of Lamoine, one could still see the site of Madame de Gregoire's home lot, "Fontaine Leval," which was marked by a row of Lombardy poplars. One wonders if these trees still exist in any way.

As already mentioned, Morison devoted a good deal of text and attention to the navigation of the waters to and from and around the island. One of the most telling reflections of this passion lies in a lengthy paragraph describing the locations of buoys and lighthouses. In the very next paragraph he scorns the radar- and fathometer-equipped power boat: "Nowadays any fool...can roar through the thoroughfares and passages, blow high blow low, fog or sunshine, as easily as he can drive a car."

In writing about islanders and their livelihoods, Morison comes off as a fervent admirer. "Your true Mount Deserter," he noted, "disproved the old adage, 'Jack of all trades, master of none.'" He described with poetic detail how Wilbur Herrick would fashion ax handles out of hickory trees, and he provides a marvelous portrait of Maggie Higgins, stewardess of the Rockland-Bar Harbor steamboat line.

In the 41 years that have passed since the appearance of Morison's book, the historical literature of Mount Desert Island and its surroundings has grown substantially. There are individual town histories, such as Virginia Sanderson's account of Somesville, *The Living Past*. On the occasion of its bicentennial, the Town of Mount Desert published an impressive collection of histories and recollections, edited by Gunnar Hansen. Charles McLane produced his landmark three-volume study of the islands of Maine. The Island Institute has contributed through its various publications, including the annual *Island Journal*.

By a most fortuitous circumstance, the reprinting of Morison's book coincides with the publication of *Mount Desert Island, Somesville, Southwest Harbor, and Northeast Harbor* by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr. and Lydia B. Vandenberg, from the "Images of America" series.<sup>5</sup> These two

studies are for all intents and purposes companion volumes. As you read Morison's accounts of the Abenaki Indians returning to the island in the summer, for example, you can find a vintage photograph of tribal members camped out on a rocky ledge above Deacon Clark's cove in the Shettleworth/Vandenbergh album.

In the final analysis, Morison's *The Story of Mount Desert Island* is a memoir, a travelogue, a promotional guidebook, and something of a history, all rolled into one entertaining book. My favorite passage comes toward the end, when the enduring beauty of the island is evoked: "Mount Desert is not merely an island," the admiral wrote; "it is a way of life, to which one becomes addicted; and if we are permitted in the hereafter to enter that abode where the just are made perfect, let us hope that it may have some resemblance to Champlain's Isle des Monts Deserts."

Carl Little  
Mount Desert

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See C. Richard K. Lunt, *Jones Tracy: Tall Tale Teller from Mount Desert Island, Northeast Folklore X*, 1968 (University of Maine, Orono).

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Field, *Calico Bush* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Two poems by Samuel French Morse approach this subject with great feeling: "A Poem about the Red Paint People" and "Micmac" (Collected Poems, Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Cochran and Wayne Andrews, eds., *Concise Dictionary of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> Earle G. Shettleworth and Lydia B. Vandenbergh, *Images of America, Mount Desert Island, Somesville, Southwest Harbor, and Northeast Harbor* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2001).