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THE LITERARY HERITAGE OF MAINE

RICHARD CARY

WATERVILLE, MAINE

In any consideration of literary heritage, it is imperative to examine first the history, geography, climate, the plant and animal life of its place of origin. It is by now a matter of axiom that natural environment exerts determinant pressures upon the character and expression of human habitants, shaping them ineluctably to its own cycles and symmetries. Respecting Maine, it has the longest history, the most tortuous seacoast, the quirkiest weather, and as opulent a mélange of botanic and zoologic types as may be found throughout the spectrum of the United States. Long before Columbus set eyes on San Salvador, Maine had been settled, unsettled, and resettled several times. Historians are generally in accord that Viking freebooters probed the numberless islands and inlets on the Maine littoral as early as the ninth century, some 600 years in advance of Queen Isabella’s act of faith.

The discovery and exploration of Maine owe much to the unflattering fact that it was simply in the way. The first man of record who sighted its spectacular headlands — a Scandanavian named Bjarne — was questing for Greenland; subsequent Italian and Portuguese mariners blundered into Maine while trending for China or the fabled Indies. Within decades of Bjarne’s fortuitous landfall, Leif Ericson and his party ensconced themselves briefly, but withdrew without tears after savoring one of Maine’s ferocious winters. Sundry other Norsemen reoccupied the area, but murder, intrigue, and hostile Indians nullified their ventures. For over 500 years a haze of silence overhung the land.

The second era, launched by Columbus, swelled with explorations by John and Sebastian Cabot in 1497, a quarter-century later by Giacomo Verrazano, and then sweeping forays up the coastal rivers by a motley of French, English, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese navigators. In 1609, Henry Hudson sailed into Casco Bay; in 1614 Captain John Smith, ever restive, put up at Monhegan Island.

Two expeditions, however, outweigh all others in significance, for they planted seeds which were to flourish as the hardiest shoots of Maine culture. In 1604, Sieur de Monts erected a palisade and a chapel on St. Croix Island and there edited the first newspaper native to the New World. In 1606, from a colony founded by Ralegh Gilbert and
George Popham at the mouth of the Kennebec River was floated the first vessel constructed by English hands in America. Both of these settlements succumbed to the familiar scourges of cold, hunger, scurvy, and the aborigines, but not before they had demonstrated that homesteading was practicable. The Pilgrim Fathers, arriving in 1620, reported a prosperous fishing and trading center at Pemaquid.

Nevertheless, it was not until after the Revolutionary War that the province became truly safe for family habitation. The earliest pioneers had come to exploit the natural resources of fish, game, and lumber; now they came primarily to establish permanent households. They cut back the forests, laid out small farms, developed boatbuilding, and engaged in lively trade for rum and molasses with the West Indies. By these predilections they foretold in stone the preeminently rural future of Maine.

Thanks to its distanced position, Maine’s belated emergence in the eighteenth century had this happy aspect: it missed the full force of Puritanism which engulfed Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Mostly Anglicans, Maine immigrants worked hard and wished to be let alone to live as they chose. The church and the tavern were, by convention, the first community buildings to go up, the former fulfilling intellectual as well as devotional needs, the latter an outlet for such recreational impulses as might arise. They were a liberated breed with few distinctions in rank or wealth, and religious toleration was never a divisive issue. As the rough edges wore down, a more formal morality asserted itself in laws against drinking, gambling, and dancing, but these prohibitions were seldom overzealously observed.

At this juncture it is politic to pause and inquire: What was here to constitute a literary heritage, to promote a literature indigenous and unique? The answer is manifold. There was a milieu of four contrastive spheres: the ocean, the coast, the forest, the farm. The impeninent sea, beckoning, threatening, providing and killing, but always and inescapably the quintessential hymn of existence. The contorted coastline, 212 miles long as the crow flies from Kittery to Eastport, if stretched out straight is longer than the entire eastern seaboard. A terrain of limestone and granite, with mountains so high they are first on the hemisphere to greet the rising sun; over 2500 lakes and ponds, 5000 rivers; bays and salt marshes defying census.

There were red, white, pitch and jack pines, spruce, hemlock, balsam fir, sugar maple, birch, yew, aspen poplar, tamarack, wild cherry, mountain ash, white cedar and oak trees. Low-bush blueber-
ries and bog cranberries in unrepressed supply splayed color and succulence. Ungainly moose and deer bristling with antlers roved the sheltering woodlands, wary of the cinnamon bear and gray wolves; closer to the ground prowled the weasel, lynx, chipmunk, woodchuck, porcupine, and skunk. Flowers included the bluet, buttercup, anemone, ox-eye daisy, hawkweed, aster, scarlet pimpernel, iris, devil's paintbrush, and trailing arbutus. Fowl moved in swarms: gull, crane, penguin, partridge, sandpipers, bald eagles, jays, blue heron, loons, shrikes, and cormorants. Water creatures abounded: cusk, hake, pollock, alewives, crabs, clams, shrimp, and the ineffable lobster; as did seal, otter, and beaver. Assuredly, the words of the Psalmist applied: "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

Overpowering topography, fauna and flora, however, do not of themselves engender a distinctive literature. The indispensable activator is man, his vaulting heart and radiating vision. The sea and the soil made strenuous demands upon the character of those who came to Maine. It wasn't easy. They had to discipline the wilderness and overcome the ocean's tantrums. Willy-nilly they forged intimate affiliations with nature, discerned its eternal rhythm and attuned their lives to it. The endless vista of forests and waters instilled in them a sense of physical freedom and spiritual dilation. And Maine's detached location in the outermost northeastern corner of the States begot aloofness and independence. In disparate contexts Mainers have been described as intrepid and discreet; optimistic, fatalistic; pious and pixilated; sound, eccentric; strait-laced, broad-minded; laconic and loquacious; naive, shrewd. Remarkably, the prototypical Down Eater engirded all these attributes, a chameleon whose wisdom was the residue of generations of compounded experience. This is the heritage he brought to literature.

This, and his gleanings from other men. First, the treasury of remembered song and story derived from forebears in Great Britain and France. Into this they folded the inexhaustible folklore of neighboring Indians. Upon both they heaped the accretions of Germans and other North Europeans who flowed into Maine on a second tide of immigration. Slowly a new tradition took form from the fusion of older cultures, altered and embellished by countless retellings at village stores and creaking wharves. Imagination enriched the stark realities; vernacular lent brighter sparkle to the old ballads and annals.

Thus, the literature of Maine may be likened to one of its own
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brawling rivers — fed by many underground tributaries, taking its color, flavor, and body from the contiguous soil. With the passing of time, this interaction of man and his element nourished and molded each other, giving rise to a fruitful epoch of organic expression. After the raw recordings of explorers and pioneers, after the crabbed documents of preachers and politicians, after the unavoidable long night of foreign mimicry, a native literature of observation and inference came into being as a mirror to its image.

The first creditable anthology of Maine poetry (George Bancroft Griffith, The Poets of Maine, 1888) included over 430 bylines and ran to 850 pages. Kenneth Roberts eyed this “passion for writing” in his home state and declared waggishly that it was all due to iodine, the exhilarating odor of iodine released by the pounding of surf over seaweed-covered ledges and universally inhaled by the populace. Iodine or no, there has been no dearth of writing in the Pine Tree State since Sieur de Monts issued his fateful newspaper on St. Croix Island almost four centuries ago.

The first writer of consequence in the Maine stream is Sally Sayward Barrell, later Madam Wood (1759-1855). Born in York, a resident of Wiscasset and Portland, she began at the turn of the century by grinding out in rapid sequence four saccharine Continental romances. Following a lacuna of twenty-three years during which she published nothing, she overtly rebelled. “Why,” she asked, “must the amusements of our leisure hours cross the Atlantic and introduce foreign fashions and foreign manners to a people certainly capable of producing their own?” With this spunky demurril, Madam Wood reversed her bearings in 1827. Tales of the Night propelled an American conception, incorporating Maine scenes and characters in an unaffected manner. As art it fell short of the target, but it was an opening shot pointed unerringly in the right direction.

The first truly national impact of Maine writing was made shortly afterward by two comedians. In post-Revolutionary dramas, the once-pristine Yankee had been reduced to a hackneyed tomfool. It remained for Seba Smith (1792-1868), of Buckfield, to re-define his qualities and validate his actual identity. Smith contributed to the Portland Courier a series of letters which he signed “Major Jack Downing, a Down East Yankee.” He invested Downing with the nasal twang and rich lingo of the heartland around Long Lake, a Molière in homespun whose satiric bite was worse than his bark. Against a backdrop of country common sense, Jack Downing lampooned the false values of a raucous society
on the make. Seba Smith’s laughing veracity motivated a salty succession of regional American counterparts, culminating in Will Rogers.

Charles Farrar Browne (1834-67), the other Maine comic, was born in Waterford, died at age thirty-two, but in his short span managed to raise the typical Yankee to international heights. Using the pseudonym Artemus Ward, he corrallied attention with his hilarious misspellings and malapropisms. In the guise of crackerbarrel philosopher, he held up to ridicule the excesses of greed and guile endemic in the spreading Republic. Three of his favorite motifs were Harvard, women’s rights, and the Mormons, all of which he skewered gleefully at any vulnerable point. Although this line of pungent comedy gradually thinned out, it is being maintained in our time by John Gould (b. 1908) through his bucolic newspaper at Lisbon Falls and in the prickly texture of his books, especially \textit{The Farmer Takes a Wife} and \textit{The Fastest Hound Dog in Maine}.

The first high plateau of Maine’s literary eminence was reached in the days of the flowering of New England. Oddly, only one of the writers who helped bring this about was born in the State. The others came, mined, and returned gold for gold.

The one native is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), born in Portland. As a professor of romance languages at Harvard, he found himself necessarily dispensing European cognitions but, to his credit, he also made a case for matters substantially American in “Hiawatha,” “The Village Blacksmith,” and “The Arsenal at Springfield.” As to Maine, he left it, but could not forget it. During a visit in 1846, he walked Portland’s streets, round Munjoy Hill and down to old Fort Lawrence. There, by the drowsing lull of the sea, he recalled scenes and incidents of his boyhood: the harbor and the islands, ships and bearded sailors, tales of sea fights, all recounted in “My Lost Youth.” In “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” in “Songo River,” and in “L’Envoi,” he celebrates the spirit of the place which was his birthright. In “Morituri Salutamus” he pays touching tribute to the undiminished attraction of Maine: “O ye familiar scenes, ye groves of pine...Thou river, widening through the meadows green / To the vast sea.”

As a boy, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) came frequently from Salem, Massachusetts, to visit his uncle in Raymond, Maine, and for a year lived there with his mother. Darkness lay in his heart even then, but the somber beauty of the primeval forest around Sebago Lake gripped him as no other site in America or Europe did thereafter. In his diary he scribbled impressions of fishing all day, climbing Pulpit
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Rock, hunting duck, swapping jackknives, and sitting enthralled while grizzled men matched story for story in his uncle’s store. The Pyncheon mansion in *The House of the Seven Gables* was one he saw in Waldo County; the peddler in “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” was one he encountered in Maine; the original of Reverend Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil” was Reverend Joseph Moody of York. For four years Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College. Out of this interlude, he fashioned his first novel *Fanshawe*, in the pages of which Bowdoin and Brunswick are readily recognizable.

In 1847, in 1853, and again in 1857, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) made extensive excursions into Maine woods, mountains, and waters, notably Katahdin, Chesuncook, Allegash and the East Branch. Both a poet and a scientist of nature, he uncovered endless sources of allurement in Maine’s remoter stations. His book *The Maine Woods* attests his overriding love affair with this State. Thoreau’s cryptic last words, said to be “moose” and “Indian,” signify the depth of his attachment to Maine’s free-ranging creatures and to Joe Polis, his redoubtable guide.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-92) never made his home in Maine, but the effects of his numerous visits and vacations burrowed into his creative consciousness. One of his most successful ballads, “The Dead Ship of Harpswell,” was based on a legend linked with Orr’s Island in Casco Bay. He wrote “To a Pine Tree” after a trip to Moosehead Lake. The heroine of his poem “Maud Muller” was a young girl he met in York. And his long narrative “Mogg Megone” concerns an Indian chief slain near Scarborough.

The fame of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96) abides of course in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which she wrote in Brunswick while her husband, a professor of natural and revealed religion, taught classes at Bowdoin College. In the Congregational Church there one Sunday morning, she sustained a vision which guided the construction of Uncle Tom’s death scene. Mrs. Stowe is more important to Maine for *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, a saltwater tragi-comedy in which she sought to embody the setting, character, idiom, and attitudes of the rooted islanders — with only moderate success. The overarching value of this work is that Sarah Orne Jewett, reading it at thirteen, was goaded and inspired to proffer one day her own firmer version of Maine people’s lives and environs. By such germinal means did Connecticut’s Mrs. Stowe and her three Massachusetts confreres Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whittier provide encouragement and promotional impetus to Maine
natives capable of engendering literature steeped in the actualities of Maine existence.

Before entering the most fertile period of Maine writing, it would be instructive to docket parenthetically half a dozen authors whose names should not be lost. Four of these turned out books for children which gained repute far beyond Maine's borders. Most prolific was Jacob Abbott (1803-79) of Hallowell, whose more than 200 titles featured the pranks and pieties of young Rollo at home and abroad. Elijah Kellogg (1813-1901), a preacher at Harpswell, tended more toward life in his own vicinity. His Elm Island and Whispering Pines series focus fondly on guileless pioneers of Maine's islands and coastways. Two women, not natives but longtime residents of the State, produced sterling juveniles with Maine substance: Laura E. Richards (1850-1943), whose Captain January still stirs childish hearts (her Yellow House in Gardiner is now a certified historic landmark); and Kate Douglas Wiggan (1856-1923), whose Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm seems deathless. After spending most of her childhood and later summers around Hollis — her parents were Mainers — she made it her permanent home. The "Quillcote" of her stories is verisibly Hollis, while the high-steeple, square-belfry church at Buxton reappears in The Old Peabody Pew. She stipulated that her ashes be scattered over the Saco River.

Of the other two fine minor talents, Elizabeth Akers Allen (1832-1911) was born in Strong and is best known for her wistful couplet: "Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight,/Make me a child again just for tonight." Her volume of verse, Forest Buds from the Woods of Maine, is suffused with snow and November, spring by the cherry tree, sunken rocks, winter-killed roses, giant pines, and woodbine — imagery inseparable from the profoundest meaning of Maine. Lastly, Holman Day (1865-1935), born in the boondocks between Vassalborough and Augusta, nurtured himself on the juices of his home state and released its inimitable savor in a spate of evocatively titled books: Up in Maine, King Spruce, Pine Tree Ballads, and Kin o' Ktaadn.

One other tract of Maine literature may be passed over lightly before approaching the elevated foreground. Despite the presiding stimulus of the summer theater at Lakewood — oldest in the United States — drama has had no shining exponent from Maine. There are some few crumbs of consolation. 'Way Down East, Lottie Parker's perpetual potboiler, is set in Maine, as is Shore Acres, a melodrama by
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James A. Herne (1839-1901) played out on a farm near Bar Harbor, off Frenchman's Bay. Closer to our own time, Owen Davis (1874-1956), a native of Portland who spun out 200-odd plays, propagated *Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model*, but redeemed himself by winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 with *Icebound*, a grim exposure of hate and greed in the Penobscot County town of Veazie. It is a fact that Eugene O'Neill first met his wife Carlotta Monterey at Belgrade Lakes. Sadly, that gives the State no legitimate claim on the melancholic bard.

Looking ahead over the array of Maine's most honored authors, one is struck by an extraordinary uniformity of attitude: their partiality to the past. With instinctual acuity they avoided the mawkishness that usually accompanies veneration of the olden, golden days. Already manifest in Longfellow's and Elizabeth Aker's Allen's homage to the remembered ecstasies of childhood, this point of view develops uncurbed in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. After Madam Wood's rebuff of transplanted English and French influences, the rustic culture of Maine established roots perhaps too staunch. A kind of suspended narcissism took place. Nowhere and no time appeared more desirable to Maine writers than Maine in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Its strength and simplicity, modes and ideals fastened upon their comprehension with the hug of a religion. With few exceptions this nostalgic adoration of former glories became the outstanding earmark of the finest in Maine literature.

The Maine author who first conferred a status of philosophy on the backward glance is Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) of South Berwick. Acclaimed by critics of her own generation as the foremost littérateur north of Boston, she is still unsurpassed in the field of Maine prose. Her father, a country doctor, took her with him on his professional rounds. As they drove to seacoast shacks and inland farmhouses, he expatriated on the wonders of nature alongside the rutted roads. While he treated his patients, she wandered about intently noting their dwellings and activities, clothes and talk, sorrows and oddities. Alike in a way to Hawthorne, she sat in her grandfather's general store, beguiled by the unceasing yarns of sailors and lumberjacks come to barter and relax. By the time she was twenty, she had accumulated a crowning reservoir of knowledge about the people and the place of her nativity. With a style limpid as crystal, a sympathy earnest though not obtrusive, she poured back her perceptions into twenty-one volumes of stories, sketches, and novels, the best
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She matured at a moment in American history when shipping and shipbuilding slid into decline and railroads and industry rose to dominate the national economy. Like most of her peers, she viewed the change as an abomination. So, she reinstated that happier era just past, filling her pages with garrulous sea captains, winsome old spinsters, self-reliant young females, indomitable fishermen, and a tinted miscellany of eccentrics. She reproduced a locus of quiescent harbors, lighthouses, and green islands set in the encroaching sea; turning inward to dusky stands of fir and spruce, deserted farms and languishing towns; skies rippling with thrush and crow, the ground spilling over with chicory, larkspur, and whiteweed. Into this tapestry she interwove the muted dilemma of her people: clinging valiantly to their way of life, knowing it to be defunct.

Mary Ellen Chase (1887-1973), infected in childhood by Miss Jewett’s precedent, succeeded to her mantle. “I believe,” she wrote, “that Maine people have a splendid heritage, both from sea and land, that it is the business of us all to live up to.” She was as good as her word. Born and brought up in Blue Hill, she absorbed the tradition and reaffirmed the dignity of the natives in their maritime-agrarian world. In such books as The White Gate, A Goodly Heritage, and The Lovely Ambition, she trundles back to her girlhood days in a gusty seaport; in Mary Peters, Silas Crockett, and Windswept, she recreates several generations of Maine clipper-ship families caught in irreversible currents of change. Into these sagas she fed her memories of Boothbay Harbor, Owl’s Head, Belfast, and Searsport, her grandmother’s anecdotes, age-old hymns and aphorisms, the ribald songs of sailors — always conjuring up displaced values, days gone but never to be dissembled.

On the masculine side, Kenneth Roberts (1885-1957) is Maine’s most potent writer of prose. He too hove into the past, following however a rather different tack. A native of Kennebunk, where his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had lived, he sought his genesis indefatigably. “I’ve had a theory for a great many years,” he said, “that a writer can write more effectively about his own people than he can about people that aren’t in his blood.” And Maine was emphatically in Robert’s blood. Indeed, when Arnold Toynbee in his monumental study of world civilizations put down Maine as “a relic of
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seventeenth century New England inhabited by woodmen and watermen and hunters," Roberts roared back at the misguided pundit in a furious essay, "Don't Say That About Maine." As his chain of superb regional chronicles unrolled — Arundel, Rabble in Arms, Captain Caution, Northwest Passage, Oliver Wiswell — estimable critics compared facets of his work with those of Scott, Dumas, and Stevenson, not to mention Dickens and Thackeray. They were not far off the mark. What other American historical novelist ranks so close to James Fenimore Cooper and his Leatherstocking Tales? With fastidious accuracy Roberts visualized a nation very young and very bold, crackling with the myths and mores of York County; a new, dynamic race rising out of the beautiful, mysterious wilderness. He too exploited the twin salients of Maine reality — the sea and the forest — but unlike Miss Jewett, who worked in exquisite miniature, Roberts favored the epic scale. His body of work stands as an imperishable billet-doux to his beloved State.

Three out-of-State novelists to whom Maine is indebted must be recorded here, with regrettable brevity. First in time is Booth Tarkington (1869-1946), the gentlemen from Indiana, who embraced Kennebunkport as his seasonal home for many years. The opening scenes of his first novel take place in Bar Harbor, and five of his books take stock of the Maine experience. An alert observer of social skullduggery, he dealt mainly with the tensions between permanent dwellers and transient summer visitors, gliding on the lighter side of this largely invisible friction in all but one instance. He made no secret of his affinity with Maine style and spirit. And he came by this honestly. His family had its origins in New England.

Second is Ben Ames Williams (1889-1953), born in Mississippi, grown up in Ohio, but resident of Maine by choice in every possible interval. He was infatuated with the locale and adopted it as his own, later marrying into an old-line Maine sea-captain family. His first novel, All the Brothers Were Valiant, centers on a whaling dynasty. His principal accomplishment was to fabricate an entire rural Maine community which he named "Fraternity," modeled on the Searsmont area. He wrote over a hundred short stories heralding the pastoral composure there as against the frenetic pace of urban existence. He dipped repeatedly into Maine history for such novels as The Strange Woman (about Bangor after the War of 1812) and Come Spring (about Sterling, now Union, during the Revolution). He willed that his ashes to be buried on a knoll under the shadow of Lavenseller Moun-
tain at Searsmont.

Third, Erskine Caldwell (b. 1903). It comes as a surprise, more often as something of a shock to most readers, that Tobacco Road and God’s Little Acre were not written in a dingy purliu of Georgia, but plumb in the heart of central Maine. Caldwell lived in that district five years, long enough for him to catch both the understated tragedy and the earthy humor of its denizens. With unfailing comic energy and occasional brutality, he objectively realized native place and character in his novel A Lamp for Nightfall and in such short fiction as “Country Full of Swedes,” in “The Corduroy Pants” about Skowhegan, “Mama’s Little Girl” based on an incident in Waterville, and “Ten Thousand Blueberry Crates” in Androscoggin County.

Now for the last of the categories: Maine’s modern poets. Candidates for consideration are rife, of course, but circumspection restricts choice to four unassailable figures. Of highest renown are Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, both of whom took leave of the State but could never excise the marks it had graved on their genius.

Like most prophets, Robinson (1869-1935) was not without honor except in his own village. He was discovered by Theodore Roosevelt, accorded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry three times, and extolled by Yale in 1922 as “the foremost living poet.” But back in Gardiner on the Kennebec, he was remembered as a jobless, listless youth who fed on the delusion that writing poetry was a respectable occupation. In this thriving, profit-minded, suspicious rivertown, he bore without plaint the obloquy of ne’er-do-well. The cold of Maine winters pinched his marrow and permeated his poems. A prince of irony and pity, he lay bare his congealed immanence in the sonnet “New England”:

Here where the wind is always north-north-east
And children learn to walk on frozen toes,...
Joy shivers in the corner where she knits
And Conscience always has the rocking-chair,
Cheerful as when she tortured into fits
The first cat that was ever killed by Care.

Robinson set his sights on the past but not, as other Maine writers, on Maine’s past. He trudged down the corridors of legendry to the court of King Arthur, and for years his reputation rested on the long narratives of Lancelot, Merlin, and Tristram. Nowadays it is commonly granted that his most durable work consists in the short, tart biographies of his contemporaries in Gardiner, which he reconstituted
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as Tilbury Town. There are about seventy of these verses composed over his four decades of literary achievement. Taken together, they approximate Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*, with a Yankee tang. Robinson’s dry provincial wit flickers over a gallery of tortured portraits (his own paramount among them) which uncover an abyss of hidden neuroses and waning vitality. Only now and again appears a person not at odds with himself or the world. To all alike he addressed a compassion drawn from the pain of his personal disorientation. There was Miniver Cheever, child of scorn, who coughed and coughed and went on drinking; Cliff Klingenhagen sipping wormwood and smiling; Reuben Bright, who tore down the slaughterhouse in a paroxysm of grief; Mr. Flood lifting his jug and seeing two moons: and the imperial, wholly-enviable Richard Cory, who, “one calm summer night, / Went home and put a bullet through his head.” Out of bitterness and love, Robinson distilled full measure from these incarcerate lives around him, yielding to the world an oblique glimpse at Maine’s darker legacy.

To many readers Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) is known merely as a poet of despair and disaffection, a cynical Queen of the May in Greenwich Village of the Roaring Twenties. Around Rockland, Maine, they still recall her as a red-haired, green-eyed, barefoot tomboy, mercurial and vague, a sort of Down East leprechaun. In those years she evidently imbibed Maine through the pores of her naked feet. The initial lines of her adolescent masterpiece “Renaissance” read:

All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay.

Anyone willing to get his feet soaked in the wet grass, as she did, can locate several such scenes in the Camden area, but whether he will derive the How and the Why of Things, as she did, is debatable.

Whenever she grew weary of the abrasive city, she would renew her psyche on Ragged Island in Casco Bay, the Elm Island of Elijah Kellogg’s stories. So it follows in her poems. When the slick and the brittle lines are shaken out, what remains are fresh, flowing lyrics redolent of Maine. In her median period, candles burned at both ends while the world disintegrated, but earlier she caroled the gaunt crags, rocky beaches, sheep, catbirds and tamaracks, tumbled sheds, broken
wagons, and the salt smell that pervaded her lifeblood as a child. She too was a Pulitzer Prize laureate, and with Longfellow and Robinson comprises a towering trio among American sonneteers.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin (1892-1955), Maine’s third Pulitzer Prize poet, was reared on his father’s saltwater farm near Harpswell. With gusto matched by few local-colorists, he poked through every inch of his small kingdom and flushed out treasure after treasure, ruddy and wonderful. “I began being a poet there,” he told, “among lighthouses and barns and boats, tides and fogs and apples and hired men.” He inhaled great gobs of Kenneth Roberts’ euphoric iodine and became gloriously tipsy. “This is my country...These are my people,” he cried to the gnarled landscape and the burly virtues all around him. He revivified oral history and lore on every page of One-Horse Farm, Yankee Coast, and Christmas in Maine. He wrote a round of novels with Maine settings, a chronicle Kennebec River, Cradle of Americans, and an autobiography ruefully titled Lost Paradise. More urgently than either of the two preceding poets, Tristram Coffin regressed to an unblemished illusion of the past, his sunstruck epoch which could never be retrieved save through the imagination.

Last of the four admissible modern poets is Wilbert Snow (1884-1977), whose viewpoint hovers between contemporaneous Robinson and retrospective Coffin. Snow, born on Whitehead Island off St. George, paints with glistening vividness tableaus of January thaw, sea gardens, quarries, cornfields in winter; inbred activities such as cooting, codfishing, fox-hunting; matchless drollies like Captain George and Aunt Cal; clamdiggers, leathermen. The titles of his books are as enticing as the materials he enlists: Down East, Spruce Head, Maine Tides, and Inner Harbor. How fitting, then, to cap this discourse on Maine’s literary heritage with Snow’s poem, appositely called “Heritage”:

They made their graveyards on the hill,
Their houses just below,
And something from the tombs came down
The slope long years ago;

It fastened on the cellar walls,
It climbed the rough-hewn beams
Clear to the attic, back again,
And mildewed in the seams,—

Till those who called these dwellings home
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Saw the dark spate leave behind
A tiny fringe of graveyard loam
Upon New England’s mind.

Not often would one find articulated so succinctly this mystical synthesis of man and nature, soil and soul in the eventuation of Maine character and literature.

Inexorable modifications of dimension, direction, and tempo have already defiled the purity of this interchange and raised disturbing questions. What is in the future for Maine’s literary heritage? Will it preserve its hard-won postulates or bow to the homogenizing pressures of all-pervasive media?

Maine is still aloofly the northernmost, easternmost sector of the Union, out of direct route to anywhere. Despite seasonal invasions by skiers, hunters, alpinists, and cute-craft admirals, no great infiltration of new modes is yet discernible. The State is still predominantly agrarian and still relies on its serrated seacoast for much of its economy. More drastic conversions may be forced upon the State to oblige the national interest, but the prospect is not alarming. Mainers still prefer life at a moderate gait, morality at a reasonable level, fun in low key. As Maine’s most representative authors to date have steadfastly looked backward in ardor, it seems less than heretical to presume that Maine’s current and future authors will incline appreciably toward the none-too-different ethic of this nearer tenure.

Meanwhile it is a comfort to behold that, somewhere in these harried States, the ancient verities are holding the line. In these days of racial turbulence, economic disarray, genetic legerdemain, and fear of nuclear Götterdämmerung, it is reassuring that in cleaving to its ancestral alliances the State of Maine remains persuasively a State of Mind.