

# The Adirondacks: Wild Island of Hope

By Gary Randorf, Baltimore, *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, 2002

REVIEW BY EDWARD KANZE

When one thinks of great Adirondack books, certain titles come to mind. There are the seminal photographic works — most notably Nathan Farb's *The Adirondacks* (Rizzoli, 1985) and Carl Heilman's *Adirondacks: Views of an American Wilderness* (Rizzoli, 1999). There are the important histories, written by Philip Terrie, Barbara McMartin, and others, and the first-rate anthologies such as Paul Jamieson's *Adirondack Reader* (first published in 1964 by the Adirondack Mountain Club) and Jim Gould's *Rooted in Rock: New Adirondack Writing 1975-2000* (Adirondack Museum, 2001). In outdoor adventure we have the works of Anne LaBastille, in Adirondack furniture and Great Camps Craig Gilborn, and in natural history Michael DiNunzio's *Adirondack Wild Guide* (Adirondack Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Council, 1984). In fiction, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter* tower over the rest. The field of personal memoir about the Adirondacks is perhaps more extensive than all the other genres put together.

One could fill a bookshelf with Adirondack classics. But what if a single book is called for? What title can be recommended to old-timers, newcomers, and tourists to give them a sense of the Adirondack region in all its geologic, biological, historical, political and economic complexity? Until recently, no title fit the bill.

Now Gary Randorf, a long-time Adirondack conservationist currently serving as Senior Counselor to the Adirondack Council in Elizabethtown,

has changed all that. His *The Adirondacks: Wild Island of Hope*, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in conjunction with the Adirondack Council, squeezes a bit of all of the above within its paperback covers. You won't find John Brown and his family trekking into the mountains as you will in *Cloudsplitter*, or learn as much Adirondack dendrology as you will in Ed Ketchledge's *Forests and Trees of the Adirondack High Peaks Region*. Like certain stretches of the Ausable, Randorf's flow is broad and swift. Yet in one volume, his book does a remarkable job of summoning the region to life in multiple dimensions.

Foremost in Randorf's book are the photographs. There are one hundred of them, ninety-eight in color. Compositions range from the grand mountain vistas that typify other Adirondack photo books to intimate views of a young moose, a white-tailed deer, colored leaves, and a luminous patch of bluets. Randorf displays a mastery of light and composition in nearly every image. Indeed, he seems to possess an almost supernatural ability to place himself at exactly the right convergence of subject, illumination, and angle.

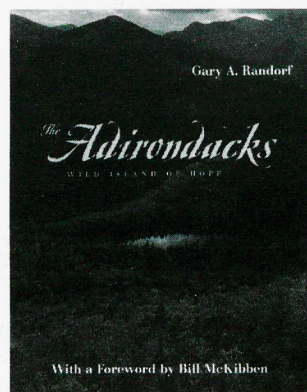
These are extraordinary images. One of my favorites is "From Crooked-S Turn on the Whiteface Memorial Highway." The foreground, a spruce-fir forest on Whiteface Mountain's southwest flank, lies dusted by snow and drenched in shadow. In the distance, Lake Placid shimmers, the waters reflecting pewter clouds. Just to the west of the lake, a ball of fire seems to hover. It's a quirk of sun-

light. Another photographer might have left his camera in his daypack, but Randorf, who travels light with 35 mm equipment, recognized the opportunity and seized it. The result is an image that ranks among the finest Adirondack photographs ever captured on film or pixel.

Photographers of wilderness regions often go to great lengths to exclude humans from the landscape. I lament the trend. Any artistic separation of the human from the wild serves only to exaggerate a schism

that is artificial, dangerous, and unsupported by biological fact. The same natural forces that produced *Castor canadensis* and *Ursus americanus* generated *Homo sapiens*. Randorf gives us the usual glamorous landscapes interspersed with flora and fauna, but he shows people in the Park, too. Nearly a quarter of the photographs include direct or indirect evidence of human presence. This seems about right. People represent an important component of the Adirondack landscape. Yet they and their works will always be dwarfed by glacier-scarred mountains, valleys narrow and wide, wild lakes, and cold, rushing rivers.

My only quibble with the photos in *The Adirondacks: Wild Island of Hope* regards their size on the printed page. Many are reproduced at the size of playing cards. The largest appear at 8 x 10 inches. Randorf's extraordinary work deserves bigger, better, treatment. That said, I hesitate to call the situation a failing of the book. A conscious decision was undoubtedly made by Randorf and his publishers to produce a relatively compact, affordable book that would



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reach a broad audience, rather than an oversized, \$50 tome with world-class artistic merit but limited popular appeal. The price I paid in a Saranac Lake bookstore was \$22.95 — a steal for a work of this quality and scope.

The text of Randorf's 200-page book makes a worthy complement to the pictures. The photographer/author writes with a light touch, moving from history to ecology to politics and back again in heartfelt, mostly first-person prose. A glance at the index gives a sense of topical range. The first entry is Acid Rain. The last is Wright Mountain. Between appear (this is just a sample) Adirondack Forest Preserve; Adirondack Park Agency; Adirondacks: Arrival of Europeans; Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century; Deer-Hunting; Development; Herbicides; Indians; Land use; Pharaoh Lake Wilderness; Pollution; Private Land; and Stewardship.

Some of the most interesting reading in the book comes from Randorf's accounts of adventures in the company of Adirondack legends such as the late Greenleaf Chase, a naturalist, and Clarence Petty, an all-around man-of-the-woods, pilot, and conservationist. One memorable day in 1972, Randorf's third on the job at the A.P.A., Chase took the new staff member to survey a proposed development site on Upper Saranac Lake.

Randorf writes: "Spring was bursting. The whole of the Adirondacks, the great North Woods, looked like they had been washed and hung out on a line to dry.

Everything sparkled. Warblers and other migrating birds decorated every tree branch. We found a ruffed grouse nest containing exactly a dozen eggs. Wildflowers carpeted the forest floor. The lake was of the deepest blue, and the wavelets disintegrated on the shore like melting pieces of crystal." Lyricism of this sort appears frequently, supplying a literary echo to the photographs.



*Above, harvest time in the farm fields of Essex. Left, winter along the West Branch of the Ausable River. Photographs by Gary Randorf, from his book, The Adirondacks: Wild Island of Hope.*

Yet Randorf has more on his agenda than celebrating the region's beauty. He also confronts issues such as acid precipitation, accelerating second-home development, ozone layer depletion, global warming, and the persistent conflict between those in favor of preserving the Park in a mostly primeval state and those who would eviscerate the A.P.A. and repeal the New York State Constitution's "forever wild" clause. This part of the book is sobering and instructive.

Fierce disagreements over how to inhabit and enjoy the Adirondacks linger

just beneath the generally friendly relations among residents. Randorf will not let us forget this. In a chapter titled "Will The Forest Be Unbroken?," he describes the aftermath of the 1990 release of a report by then-Governor Cuomo's Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-first Century. "People threatened to burn the woods, burn the homes of preservationists, and take up arms. I was

told that I had a bounty on my head. A caller told my answering machine that the Adirondack Council's office would be burned if the proposed Gleneagles Development . . . was not approved by the Adirondack Park Agency." Swastikas were painted on the windows of the Adirondack Council offices where Randorf worked. A facsimile tombstone was left in front of the building. An angry mob appeared one Saturday morning at the house of a colleague. Its spokesman said, "We'll see you buried" and told the man to move out of town. Had a sheriff

who lived next door not intervened, violence might have ensued.

In short, *The Adirondacks: Wild Island of Hope*, gives us the good, the bad, and the ugly. This is as it should be. Dark forces confront the region, and as Randorf urges, we must confront them. Yet never should we take our eyes off the natural splendor. This book does a fine job of helping us do that — showing those who open its covers the colors and that contours that, in the long run, will enrich us far more than any impulsive lunge for profit.