Rooted in Rock

The Case for a True Adirondack Literature

BY JIM GOULD

What is Adirondack literature? Paul Jamieson, editor of The Adirondack Reader, the first comprehensive anthology of writing on the Adirondacks, answered this question by gathering Adirondack writings from many genres — essays, letters, journals, travel sketches, memoir, and fiction. The 525-page anthology has entries from ninety writers, on an assortment of topics, issues, and settings, that range from Champlain’s first view of the Adirondacks in 1609 to literary works that date into the late 1970s.

While the Jamieson anthology is exhaustive in its representation of writings about the Adirondacks, no more than four writers of the nearly ninety writers included are or were full-time residents of the region.

Is Jamieson’s Adirondack Reader misnamed then? No, but the collection probably could not be accurately labeled “Adirondack literature.” Does an authentic regional literature demand some kind of residency requirement?

For the sake of argument, yes. In the last few decades, there’s been a surge in regional publishing and writing in the United States. Literary works created by resident writers, to generalize, seem to possess a greater degree of authority, knowledge, texture, and experience, and are rooted in a distinctive setting.

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The bedrock of so-called place-based writing is, above all, a commitment to a landscape and many of its elements — environmental, economic, cultural, and social, among others. “Commitment” is not used lightly here, as the level of commitment reveals the depth of the quality and authenticity of the writing. In terms of commitment, it is equivalent to the difference between dating and marriage. Taking the metaphor a step further, Jamieson’s anthology of Adirondack writing is akin to approximately 500 pages of one-night stands.

However, since 1982, when Jamieson’s anthology was published, evidence of a new place-based literature can be found in the Adirondacks. A resident population of writers has gained regional and national prominence using the Adirondacks as their primary subject matter or, at the very least, as a significant point of departure.

These writers find their subjects in their jobs, which, like Chuck Brumley and Mason Smith, reveal the vagaries of making a living in a largely inhospitable landscape. These subjects also include the compelling environmental arguments of Bill McKibben, rooted in the day-to-day concerns the author makes so vivid from his home near North Creek. There’s the private and public struggle of finding balance between solitude and community that we see in the writings of Sue Halpern, Jon Dallas, and Anne LaBastille. And then of course, there’s just the written record of life here in these mountains: ice-fish with Betsy Folwell, run white water with Chris Shaw, join Tom Hughes for breakfast at a village diner, and explore with Curt Stager the effects of acid rain on remote mantaintops.

The power of the written word is no stranger to the Adirondacks; it has had perhaps as much to do in shaping this landscape as the Wisconsin Ice Shield. In 1837, the published reports by Ebenezer Emmons of his party’s first known ascent of Mount Marcy brought the first travelers to the High Peaks and the central lake region of the Adirondacks. William H. H. Murray’s Adventures in the Wilderness incited the new middle classes to escape the chaotic, smoky, and garbage strewn cities of the Northeast and return to what they thought were their wild, pioneering roots. Fools or not, Murray’s readers brought a kind of nature-based tourism to the mountains, installing arguably the first truly sustainable economic engine to the region.

Essays and features in the mainstream press by Charles Dudley Warner, George Washington Sears, Charles Hallock, Charles Fenno Hoffman, Seneca Ray Stoddard, and others — especially in opinion shapers such as Harper’s Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, and The New York Times — emphasized a backyard frontier; a wilderness that was wild, yet accessible; and a sparsely populated mountain region full of colorful guides, resourceful entrepreneurs, and archetypal woodsmen.

The message to their readers, was clear: see the Adirondacks. But just as powerful was the subtext: save the Adirondacks. And Verplanck Colvin’s vivid reports from the field gave the scientific backbone to his colleagues’ often-romanticized, yet compelling letters, editorials, and travel essays and sketches.

The result, of course, was the establishment of a park that’s not quite a park, a wilderness that’s not quite a wilderness. The numbers are undeniable, however. The six-million acre Adirondack Park is larger than the combined acreage of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier national
parks. With only 130,000 year-round residents in a stretch of woods larger than Massachusetts, it is as sparsely populated as any region in the continental United States. The residents of Saranac Lake, the Adirondacks' largest village — there are no cities — number no more than 8,000. And then there's the water: more than 2500 lakes and ponds and more than 15,000 miles of rivers and streams. And all of this only a day's drive from many of North America's largest population centers, where all those millions of readers thirst for places different and more sustaining, exemplary, and peaceful than their own homes in America's suburban and exurban landscape.

So why do the Adirondacks suddenly have, in just a few decades, the beginnings of an authentic regional literature? This may be due to a number of simple socioeconomic and cultural circumstances like a larger, more stable professional and middle class. But I think there's something else going here, too. This nascent authentic regional literature is primarily the result of the fact that the Adirondack Park, which has only seen sustained year-round human population centers for barely more than four generations, is beginning to mature as a culture, community, and region.

Culture, that amorphous but very real and distinct accumulation of a community's behaviors, beliefs, and the other products of its thought and work, has taken root in the region during this time. And the institutions in the Adirondacks that foster culture have begun to emerge and thrive and help identify the landscape and its community's values while providing refuge and nourishment to those agents, observers, and recorders of culture, our writers.

In the Adirondacks those institutions suddenly, historically speaking, are all around us and have developed a solid and sustaining maturity. They include the Adirondack Mountain Club, which recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary; the Sagamore Institute, now more twenty-five years old; Paul Smith's College, which recently celebrated its fiftieth commencement, and the Adirondack Museum, last year marking its fortieth birthday. The Lake Placid Center for the Arts, Pendragon Theater, and the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts are all more than twenty years old now. Non-government organizations and not-for-profits such as the Adirondack Economic Development Council, the Adirondack North Country Association, the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, the Adirondack Council, and the Adirondack Local Government Review Board are, after a few decades of awkward institutional adolescence, emerging into a more mature adulthood.

Let me emphasize just how young these community institutions are: follow the Hudson River from its source on a shoulder of Mount Marcy and only 300 miles downriver — in the same watershed — is Columbia University, which was founded in 1754. That's almost a century before Emmons climbed, measured, and named Mount Marcy, a full century and then some before the Adirondacks were surveyed by Colvin.

The other significant development in the last two decades has been the growth of publications featuring writing about the Adirondacks. Nationally, there's been greater coverage of the region in prominent magazines such as Outside, Audubon, Natural History, Sierra, Backpacker, Orion, National Geographic, and The New York Times Magazine. Equally significant, the regional bimonthly Adirondack Life has emerged as a perennial award winning magazine and has given a consistent and quality forum for writers in the Adirondacks. The small literary magazine, Blue line, while edited from outside the Adirondacks at Potsdam State University and not publishing solely Adirondack letters, has also contributed to the region's literary fabric.

Although a different medium, North Country Public Radio, the National Public Radio affiliate based in Canton, New York, covers the Adirondacks with transmitters and is the only Park-wide daily source for news and community information. The station, understaffed and underpaid like most public radio outfits, has done a remarkable job of nurturing a local culture, particularly offering another outlet for regional writers. In 1998, they marked their thirtieth anniversary.

The emerging body of Adirondack literature mirrors the regional writing — and greater awareness of place — we now see blossoming among writers across the nation. Still, valuing community, place, and landscape remains a minority position in the face of the dominant mainstream culture. In other words, local, regional, and provincial are terms of lesser value, even derision, while anything national, international, and global is to be granted honor and prestige. Even so, some eloquent voices have emerged from the hinterlands in defense of those things closer to home.

In a collection of essays on the study of place in America entitled Rooted in the Land, William Vitek writes that "generally missing in [a discussion about preserving landscapes and species as well as small rural communities] is any mention of the places where we live as biological communities or the importance of human communities rooted in a storied landscape."

Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry makes a similar point, arguing that really the only concern for any writer are things important to the author's community, no matter where that community is. Furthermore, as writers, the most pressing challenge is to make readers connect with the writers' community.

One of Berry's disciples, Wes Jackson, puts it another way, calling on writers to "become native" to their landscape. In Jackson's most recent book, he writes, "It has never been our national goal to become native to this place. It has never seemed necessary even to begin such a journey. And now, almost too late, we perceive its necessity."

In the Adirondacks, we now see the landscape's human communities beginning to understand in a more complex and mature way who they are and what their collective and individual roles are in the viability of both the human and natural communities inside the Blue line.

The Adirondacks' writers are there helping to articulate, define, and uncover those values and roles. And in contrast to the common usage in American universities and colleges, these writers, in the truest sense of the term, are the more authentic writers in residence.