The closing decades of the 19th century were bleak and uncompromising ones for most Vermonters. The Civil War had extracted a tremendous toll on Vermont; she had paid dearly in human lives for the Union and the end of savagery. And when the state’s hillside fields could no longer compete with the open grazing lands of the West, the bottom fell out of Vermont’s sheep industry. Woolen mill workers, finding themselves without jobs, joined the tide of emigration rushing to the country’s urban centers in search of employment. Many Vermonters, however, chose to stick it out, to stoically weather those bleak years around the turn of the century. These were the people the late Dlys Bennett Ling of Norwich spoke of in her poem “Vermonters:”

These are the people living in this land:
    proud and narrow, with their eyes on
the hills.
They ask no favors. Their lips defend
with speech close-rationed their
hoarded souls.
You cannot love them or know them
    unless you know how a hardwood
tree
can pour blond sugar in a pegged-up
pail
in the grudging thaw of a February
day.

Vermonters have always been close to the land, but it was this strong-willed generation that cemented the bond and that exhibited a fierce loyalty to Vermont, even through the Depression and war years of the 20th century.

Even in their humor, Vermont writers of these years followed the regionalist impulse. In painting authentic and vivid verbal pictures of everyday life as they experienced it, they preserved the distinctive customs, the characteristic landscape, and the cultural temperament of an age. Collectively they have captured the spirit and voice that have made Vermont unique. And the best of this writing, when it touches those aspects of the human condition that are applicable to men and women in all ages and places, rises above the limitations of regionalism. Here’s my selection of Vermont writers who in the 20th century have made a significant contribution to the state’s literary tradition:

The Soul Of A Place

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Dorothy Canfield Fisher

Popularly known as the First Lady of Vermont Literature, Dorothy Canfield Fisher was a prolific writer. Her 10 novels, 11 collections of short stories, and 20 books of nonfiction attest to her prominence among American writers during the early part of this century. She was extremely sensitive to what she believed were dangerous trends in American society in the years prior to World War I, and she spoke out against materialism and the dehumanizing aspects of industrialization, as well as war and those ideologies that disregarded basic human rights.

Born in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1879, Fisher came to Vermont in 1907 with her husband, John, and took up residence upon the Canfield family’s ancestral property just outside Arlington. In Vermont, she found a pre-industrial society that valued the close ties of village life. What impressed her most was the way Vermonters respected the rights of their neighbors, and as changes in modern society began to erode cherished American values, she found strength in that tradition. In her short stories—most notably in Hillsboro People and A Harvest of Stories—Fisher demonstrates her uncanny ability to draw meaningful lessons from her observations of the little incidents of village life. And she defends rural living against the attacks of city-dwellers who continually criticize it for being sterile and too far removed from everything. Although Fisher used the example of Vermont to speak out about poverty, war, and anti-Semitism, it was not until 1953, when she produced Vermont Tradition: A Biography of an Outlook on Life, that she fully articulated her feelings about the state she called home. Perhaps she needed a lifetime of experience and writing to produce a book such as this. So vividly and perceptively has she interpreted the meaning of life in Vermont that most people find her name and that of her beloved state inseparable.

Mari Tomasi

A lifelong resident of Montpelier, Mari Tomasi was the voice of Vermont’s Italian community in the 1930s and 1940s. Her parents had settled in the Green Mountains because the area reminded them of their native lake region of northern Italy. Growing up in the heart of a grain country, Tomasi couldn’t escape the influence of the quarries and mining industry and the constant exchange with the other Italian families in her neighborhood. As a child Mari spent after school hours in her father’s grocery store listening to the stone cutters’ tales of the old country. Later she contributed to the Vermont Writers Project’s history of the granite industry and wrote “The Italian Story in Vermont” for Vermont History. During the Second World War she served as city editor of the Montpelier Evening Argus. But it was as a writer of fiction that Tomasi earned her reputation. In 1940 she published her first novel, Deep Grow the Roots, the story of Italian peasants caught in the web of war. Set in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, the novel tells of Luigi Sentimelli’s successful struggle to keep his small farming life undisturbed by the diabolical Mussolini’s siege of Ethiopia. To avoid being drafted into Mussolini’s army, Luigi smashes his foot with a stone. Ironically, gangrene sets in and kills him. Although Deep Grow the Roots was voted one of the outstanding novels of 1940, it cannot hold a candle to Like Lesser Gods, Tomasi’s second and final novel. Drawing heavily upon her knowledge of Barre’s granite quarries and carving sheds and her understanding of the customs and beliefs of Italian immigrants, Tomasi tells the moving story of the everyday Joys and heartaches of a sturdy and often idealistic granite workers who, “like lesser gods,” create miracles in stone.

Ralph Nading Hill

Born in 1917, Ralph Nading Hill was a native and lifelong resident of Burlington, Hill, who died in December of 1998. Born the son of a Catholic priest, he was raised in the world of Lake Champlain—Vermont’s last lakes. In Lake Champlain: Key to Empire, he clarified the lake’s crucial role during Vermont’s formative years. Hill’s large-sized boats that opened this big waters for fishing and leisure visitors, and that helped facilitate Vermont’s commerce with the rest of the world fascinated Hill. He recounted this story in Sidewheeler Sage and The W
The Vermont Poetry Tradition

Especially in this century, Vermont’s pastoral countryside and resilient, no-nonsense inhabitants have inspired poets. Robert Frost all but began the tradition single-handedly with his now familiar poems chronicling the lives and insights of his Vermont neighbors. Born in San Francisco in 1874, Frost kept a home in Vermont for the last 40 years of his life, and those years left an indelible mark on his thinking and language. Like his north country neighbors, Frost clothed intensity of feeling in understatement and restraint. He characteristically offers his readers small events and concentrated emotions in disciplined lines of deceptively simple language. Often a modernist in tone, Frost kept to traditional verse forms. He considered free verse to be “playing tennis with the net down.”

Who can’t remember reading — and perhaps memorizing — at least one or two Frost poems while in grade school? Frost’s poetry also came to symbolize a rural America that was vanishing and was therefore held all the more valuable. Such poems as “Mending Wall,” “Stopping by Woods,” and “Birches,” summed up rural experience for a country that very much wanted to hold onto its rural traditions. Those and other Frost poems have become part of the American literary heritage, even as they remain emblematic of Vermont.

Frost’s influence is evident everywhere. Pastoral poetry — the poetry of farm and country life — remains a vital and important tradition here, as the works of Newane’s William Mundell and others writing in that tradition amply demonstrate. And there are many other styles in 20th century Vermont verse. The free verse tales of village and farm penned by Manchester pharmacist Walter Hard, the intense meditations on people and landscape of Frances Frost (no relation to Robert), the insightful, well-crafted verses of Orleans poet James Hayford (see profile, page 24), the brooding, grailed ruminations of Hayden Carruth, and the rhyed, intense, often bitter socialist commentary of Sarah Cleghorn suggest some of the range of voice and style that can be found in Vermont poetry.

Yet while there are differences, there are also common threads of vision and experience woven through Vermont’s best poems. They often share a love of the natural world, an accessibility for small-town life, and a bittersweet, humorous tolerance for the quirks and foibles of humankind.

Accessibility — a clear, understandable way of writing — is also a characteristic of most Vermont poetry, and it is a hallmark of the work of the current Vermont state poet, Galway Kinnell. Kinnell’s passionate concern for both the world of nature and the world of man, his intelligence and brilliant imagination, and his tender concern for his friends, children, and Vermont neighbors is due to the long and honorable tradition of poetry in the Green Mountains.

Noel Perrin

Urban, witty, and a native New Yorker, Noel Perrin is not afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty. In fact, this Dartmouth College English professor downright enjoys putting
around his small farm in Thetford. Read-
ers of Boston Magazine, Vermont Life, and Country Journal have come to know him as a “sometime farmer” and eagerly seek his advice on such country matters as how to buy a used pickup truck, how to use a pepper, how to keep animals out of the neighbor’s garden, and how to make maple syrup — and then what to do with it besides putting it on pancakes. It’s easy to put faith in Perrin’s sugges-
tions because we get the feeling that he’s learned from experience. He’s been hum-
bled by all the frustrations and embar-
rassments that come with learning to farm. And it may be that books have been Perrin’s most consistent cash crop.

Perrin is the most prominent in a long line of Vermont essayists that includes the late Veve Orrin, Murray Hoyt, and such contemporary writers as Marguer-
tise Hurry Wolf, Garret Keiser, Don Mitchell and W.D. Wetherell.

Not all of Perrin’s essays offer practi-
cal, “how to” advice, on occasion he lan-
terases a conversation with a billboard, explores the “life in a fishbowl” syn-
drome that afflicts people in small towns, muses about the covered bridge he can see from his living room window, or warns of the “adjustments” people need to make if they decide to move up coun-
try. The best of Perrin’s essays have been collected in First Person Rural, Sec-
ond Person Rural, and Third Person Rural — all now in paperback.

David Budbill

Like many other Vermont authors, Budbill is not a native Vermonter. But as an advocate of the oppressed and dow-
trodden, he has placed himself squarely in the tradition of Sarah Cleghorn, Alice Mary Kimball, Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Vermont’s other social reformers.

A teacher, political activist, a pre-
acher, Budbill grew up in Clev-
land, Ohio, and moved to Wolcott in the late 1960s. Soon, with the encouragement of poet Hayden Carruth, who was then living in nearby Johnson, Budbill was writ-
ing about life in and around Wolcott. The result was The Chainsaw Dance, a collection of poems for the rurai inhabitants of Judevica, a “ugliest town in northern Vermont. Later he produced Judevica, a myth that’s been acclaimed as Vermont’s Po-
meter.

Budbill speaks out about the injustices in the life of the 1970s and 1980s — use
employment, rural poverty, and the plights of Vietnam vets and the elderly. Readers can’t help but share his love for such characters as Anson, who was thrown off his father’s land for back taxes, or 80-year-old Granny, who spent the last decade of her life living alone in a springhouse and camper trailer, or Antoine and his woman, who would love out on welfare if they married.

Budbill is at his best when he sticks to issues close to home. There’s an honesty in his realistic portraits of Vermont loggers, farmers, drunks, factory workers, sawyers, and housewives. And he writes about their problems with understanding and compassion. In their songs we hear Budbill’s celebration of their shared humanity. Budbill is also the author of *Rolls on Black Spruce Mountain* and *Snowshoe Trek to Otter River*, two novels popular with young readers.

**Howard Frank Mosher**

Novelist and short story writer, avid fisherman and sometime basketball and baseball coach, Howard Mosher of Jericho has in the last 10 years become the voice of the Northeast Kingdom and its people, who are a mixture of old Yankee stock and the descendants of French-Canadian immigrants who migrated from Quebec over the last 100 years.

A native of upstate New York, Mosher moved north after graduating from Syracuse University and the University of Vermont and taking a brief sojourn in California. A neighbor, Jake Blodgett, befriended Mosher and initiated him into all the lore and mystery of the area—and showed him several good fishing holes, too. Blodgett, so the story goes, even tried to get the young writer a job as the local postmaster, thinking that there was so little to do that Mosher could write all day. Although he never became postmaster, write he did. *Disappearances*, Mosher’s first novel, traces the history of the Bonhomme clan and their adventures bootlegging whiskey out of Canada during Prohibition. A second, *Marie Blythe*, is the picturesque account of an indomitable pioneer woman from Quebec. And *A Stranger in the Kingdom*, the story of racial prejudice surrounding a black minister in northern Vermont, was published this fall (see excerpt, page 18). The stories in *Where the Rivers Flow North* tell of proud and resourceful people like Burt, “the only girl of nine children, the youngest and the one [her] father cursed before birth with a man’s name,” or Henry Coville, who makes one last trip to the wild upper reaches of Lord’s Bog to take his own life when he realizes he can no longer care for himself. These inhabitants of Kingdom County “struggle to live on the land that is at once their adversary and their life’s blood.” In these stories Mosher is at his best, especially in the novella that gives the collection its name.

**The Vermont Humorists**

Despite the hardships of rural life in a cold climate, Vermonters have kept their sense of humor. Sharp-edged country anecdotes aimed at driving away either the blues or one’s obstructive neighbor are the core of Vermont humor, and there have been several highly talented storytellers. For years the late Francis Colburn, a professor of art at the University of Vermont, regaled audiences with stories and jokes about Walter Wheeler, Foster Kitchen, and his other Craftsbury neighbors. Known as the “dean of Vermont humor,” his reputation for humorous monologues rivaled the renown of his wonderful oil paintings. Keith Jenison’s classic collection of one-liners, *Vermont Is Where You Find It*, has enjoyed several reprints, and he has followed that success with other volumes. And the late Allen R. Foley, a professor of history emeritus at Dartmouth College and a member of the Vermont House, was also a talented raconteur.

William Hazlett Upson’s tales of Alexander Botts, the world’s greatest super salesman, delighted Saturday Evening Post readers for 30 years. Upson, who lived in Ripon, follows Botts as he travels the world selling Earthworm tractors to everyone, including the inhabitants of watery Venice. The most popular book of humor in recent years has been *Real Vermonters Don’t Milk Goats*, a witty exploration of what it means to be a bona fide Vermonter in a changing Vermont.

Paul Eichholz teaches English at the University of Vermont. He wrote about the roots of Vermont literature in *Winter*, 1986, and is co-owner of the New England Press.