



B o o k s o f V e r m o n t I n t e r e s t

Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works, by Frank M. Bryan, University of Chicago Press, 312 pages, softcover, \$19. Hardcover edition also available.

According to University of Vermont political science professor Frank M. Bryan, political effectiveness hinges on old-fashioned town meeting democracy that affords citizens the right of involvement. "We are required to ensure that we see, that we feel, up close and face to face, what happens to each other... We are required to allow ourselves no escape from our common humanity." His latest

book, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works*, begins with an excerpt from Robert Frost's poem, "The Pasture" that highlights its final line, the engaging, "You come too."

For more than 30 years, Bryan has engaged himself and his students at some 1,500 town meetings as recorders of data and authors of personal impressions. The author of several books, his tour de force is *Real Democracy*, already being hailed as the definitive book on town meeting. Bryan's goal is to give a "clear-eyed account" of a practice he believes is at the heart of democracy.

Statistics and graphs are a political scientist's tools, and they are plentiful in this book, but Professor Bryan knows you can't remove the context of life from the study. He contends it's one thing to know 21 percent of a town's voters attended town meeting last year; but it is also important to know that the man who argued against a small subsidy for day care recently witnessed his brother's death in a horrific logging accident. Bryan's rich contexts, combined with a style that echoes the character of the annual March meetings — straightforward, face-to-face and, sometimes, in your face — make the book accessible to readers other than students of political science.

Bryan personifies his home state as "this feisty, cantankerous, liberal, cold, glorious little republic of Vermont." While his passion for town meeting can't be denied, readers not familiar with Bryan may be initially put-off by the writer's own feistiness. He instructs the reader to heed his copious footnotes: "I expect you to read them, and I justify this unusual

approach by claiming shamelessly that I have learned something of value by working for years on Vermont farms, living more with farmers and loggers than with academics, and by experiencing ... the satisfactions, frustration, irritation, anxiety and hope that real democracy brings." His is an unorthodox style, but he succeeds in making the footnotes a must-read, impressing the reader "by the complication and variety of real democracy that is often far more interesting than its symmetry."

Waning attendance makes many political pundits question the future of town meeting. Bryan's own statistics show a correlation between a town's increase in population and the decrease in the percentage of town meeting participants. Yet he argues that town meeting is alive and well; furthermore, it is mandatory to democracy, which, he says, by its very nature is limited to small units. In *Real Democracy*, he cites numerous examples of pure democracy being exercised in some of the smallest towns in Vermont, from Craftsbury to Wilmington. If Bryan had his way, the rest of the country would follow suit.

