

20th Century Writers Who Capture Vermont's Unique Character

By PAUL ESCHHOLZ

Illustrated by BERT DODSON



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 slavery. 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 are the people the late Dilys Bennett Laing 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
at all
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



Dorothy Canfield Fisher

Mari Tomasi

Ralph Nading Hill

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 disregard 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 granite country, Tomasi couldn't escape the influence of the quarries and carving sheds 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 Sentinelli's successful struggle to keep his simple farming life undisturbed by the distant clamor of Mussolini's siege of Ethiopia. To avoid being drafted into Mussolini's army, Luigi smashes his foot with a large stone. Ironically, gangrene sets in and kills him. Although *Deep Grow the Roots* was voted one of the outstanding novels of 1940, it can not 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 sturdy and often idealistic granite workers who, "like lesser gods," create masterpieces 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 1991, was the state's leading authority on Lake Champlain. In chronicling the history of Lake Champlain — Vermont's last frontier — in *Lake Champlain: Key to Liberty*, he clarified the lake's crucial role during Vermont's formative years. The boats that opened this big waterway to settlers and that helped facilitate Vermont's commerce with the rest of the world fascinated Hill. He recounted the story in *Sidewheeler Saga* and *The V*



Robert Frost

Walter Hard

Galway Kinnell

ages of Brian Seaworthy, two books that capture all the glamor and excitement of steamboating on Lake Champlain.

Hill's histories were never simple chronologies; instead he told the stories of a people and a place he loved. In such books as *Contrary Country*, *Yankee Kingdom*, and *The Winooski*, he celebrates the beauty of Vermont's landscape and documents the fierce, contrary independence of the Yankee character and how it shaped today's Vermont.

But Ralph Nading Hill was much more than a writer of history books. Like Abby Maria Hemenway before him, Hill was both a catalyst and the moving force behind most major historical enterprises and programs in Vermont. A senior editor of *Vermont Life* and a trustee of the Shelburne Museum, he was responsible for engineering the majestic steamboat *Ticonderoga's* final two-mile voyage overland to its resting place at the museum. More recently, he discovered the old Ethan Allen homestead along the banks of the Winooski and led the drive to restore this center of Vermont history and culture. Future Vermont historians will thank Ralph Hill for his enormous contributions to the state's rich collection of historical literature.

The Vermont Poetry Tradition

Especially in this century, Vermont's pastoral countryside and resilient, no-nonsense inhabitants have inspired poetry. 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 Newfane'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-

poet 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, gnarled ruminations of Hayden Carruth, and the rhymed, intense, often bitter socialist commentary of Sarah Cleghorn suggest some of the range of voice and style that can be found in Vermont-bred 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 affection 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 tie him to the long and honorable tradition of poetry in the Green Mountains.

Noel Perrin

Urbane, 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 puttering

around his small farm in Thetford. Readers 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 peavey, how to keep animals out of the neighbor's gardens, 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 suggestions because we get the feeling that he's learned from experience. He's been humbled by all the frustrations and embarrassments 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 Vrest Orton, Murray Hoyt, and such contemporary writers as Marguer-

ite Hurrey Wolf, Garret Keizer, Don Mitchell and W.D. Wetherell.

Not all of Perrin's essays offer practical, "how to" advice; on occasion he fantasizes a conversation with a billboard, explores the "life in a fishbowl" syndrome 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 upcountry. The best of Perrin's essays have been collected in *First Person Rural*, *Second 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 downtrodden, 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 preacher, Budbill grew up in Cleveland, 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 writing about life in and around Wolcott. The result was *The Chainsaw Dance*, a collection of free-verse stories about the fictional inhabitants of Judevine, "the ugliest town in northern Vermont." Later he produced *Judevine*, a poem/playscript that's been acclaimed as Vermont's *Cherry Town*.

Budbill speaks out about the injustices of life in the 1970s and 1980s — une-

VERMONT BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

Frank Bryan and Bill Mares, *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats*. Vermont humor at its best. A classic in the flatlander-native Vermonter debate. A sequel is *Out: The Vermont Secession Book*.

David Budbill, *The Chain Saw Dance*. A collection of poignant free-verse stories about the inhabitants of Judevine, "the ugliest town in northern Vermont." *Bones on Black Spruce Mountain*. A compelling adventure story for young readers. Also, look for *Snowshoe Trek to Otter River*, three stories of boys meeting the challenges of Vermont's wilderness.

Hayden Carruth, *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth*. The major collection from this prolific Vermont poet. Other collections include *North Winter and Brothers*, *I Loved You All*.

Sarah Cleghorn, *Portraits and Protests*. Poems reflecting her deep desire for social reform and her love of rural life in Vermont. *Threescore*, Cleghorn's autobiography, provides insights into the life of this self-proclaimed social activist and political maverick.

Francis Colburn, *Letters Home and Further Indiscretions*. Native Vermont humor from the "dean of Vermont humor." Includes the memorable "A Graduation Address," which was recorded in the 1960s.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition: A Biography of an Outlook on Life*. A magnificent "biography" of a state. *A Harvest of Stories*. Twenty-eight of her best short stories written over half a century, each reflects her love and understanding of human nature.

Frances Frost, *Hemlock Wall*. Selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets,

this slender volume shows Frost's full range of poetic powers, particularly in dealing with rural New England subjects. Other volumes of poetry include *Blue Harvest* and *This Rowdy Heart*. Great for young readers is *Windy Foot at the Country Fair*, one book in the extremely popular "Windy Foot Series," stories as much about family doings and relationships as about horses.

Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Brings together the full contents of all 11 of Frost's individual books of verse, from *A Boy's Will* through *In the Clearing*.

Walter Hard, *A Mountain Township*. Poetic vignettes that capture the rhythm of Vermont life and the intonation of Vermont speech. Also look for *Salt of Vermont*, *Vermont Neighbors*, and *Walter Hard's Vermont People*.

James Hayford, *Star in the Shed Window: Collected Poems*. A treasury of poems about Vermont village life and tough-minded country people. *Gritley Firing*. A young boy and his pet skunk save the family farm from greedy developers.

Ralph Nading Hill, *Lake Champlain: Key to Liberty*. The history of the lake that helped shape Vermont's settlement, growth, and even her politics, by a man who over the years came to know Lake Champlain like the back of his hand.

Murray Hoyt, *30 Miles for Ice Cream*. Delightfully humorous autobiographical sketches by this former senior editor of *Vermont Life*. *Does It Always Rain Here*, *Mr. Hoyt!* and *The Fish in My Life* are guaranteed to provide hours of reading pleasure.

Keith Jennison, *Yup . . . Nope*. A collection of humorously captioned pictures

by the master of the genre. Also look for *Vermont Is Where You Find It* and *Vermonters and the State They're In*. **Alice Mary Kimball**, *The Devil Is a Woman*. Eleven narrative poems by an early Vermont feminist.

Galway Kinnell, *Selected Poems*. His Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award winning volume includes selections from six of his previous books of poetry.

Howard Frank Mosher, *Where the Rivers Flow North*. Superb stories about the people who hang onto their way of life among the rugged hills of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. Two novels, *Disappearances* and *A Stranger in the Kingdom*, are well worth the reading.

Noel Perrin, *First Person Rural: Essays of a Sometime Farmer*. Charming and witty nonfiction about country living by a writer who's been called "a cross between Scott Nearing and E.B. White, with a little James Heriott thrown in." The sequels, *Second Person Rural* and *Third Person Rural*, are sure to delight as well.

Mari Tomasi, *Like Lesser Gods*. The moving story of the everyday joys, heartaches, and tragedies of Barre's sturdy granite workers. An impressive picture of Vermont's Italian community by one of its own members.

William Hazlett Upson, *The Best of Botts*. The finest of nearly 30 years of *Saturday Evening Post* stories about the world's favorite tractor salesman Alexander "The Great" Botts. Americans followed the lively adventures of Botts in *Earthworm Tractors*, *Earthworms Through the Ages*, and *Keep'em Crawling: Earthworms at War*.

W.D. Wetherell, *Vermont River*. Fly fishing writing at its best. A celebration of the natural world of a Vermont river valley and the life in and around it.



Noel Perrin

David Budbill

Howard Frank Mosher

Frank Bryan

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 spring-house and camper trailer, or Antoine and his woman, who would lose 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 *Bones 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 fly fisherman and sometime basketball and baseball coach, Howard Mosher of Craftsbury 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-Canadians 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, be-

friendred 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 picaresque 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 Burl, "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 obstreperous neighbor are the core of Vermont humor, and there have been several highly talented storytellers. For years the late Francis Columb, a professor of art at the University of Vermont, regaled audiences with stories and jokes about Walter Wheeler, Foster Kinney, 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 Jenkinson's classic collection of one-liners, *Vermont Is Where You Find It*, has enjoyed several reprintings, 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 Ripton, 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 Eschholz teaches English at the University of Vermont. He wrote about the roots of Vermont literature in *Winter*, 1988, and is co-owner of the New England Press.