

Two Books by Joseph Howe

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ably as much the result of forecasts of doom creating economic uncertainty and panic as of the reduction of the British protective tariff on colonial wood.

Clearly we need to know a good deal more about forest exploitation in northeastern North America during the last 150 years. Can the pattern of forest exploitation be established in detail? What was the role of lumbering in the local economy; was it truly detrimental to agriculture or did it provide a useful source of cash income for a significant proportion of the population? How important were the other multiplier effects of the forest industries? The two volumes on Maine have provided a start. Much useful information has been assembled. Above all the way is open for broadly conceived studies that attempt to establish and explain the attitudes of the settlers of the area to their environment. By adopting such broader perspectives history can address itself to its essential task of helping us to understand ourselves, rather than becoming bogged down in the minutiae of innumerable individual facts.

GRAEME WYNN

TWO BOOKS BY JOSEPH HOWE

Joseph Howe's *Western and Eastern Rambles: Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, which originally appeared in the *Novascotian* newspaper in Halifax between 1828 and 1831, has been reprinted by the University of Toronto Press.¹ Despite a fine, readable format, interesting photographs, a very good introduction and excellent editing by M.G. Parks, this reprinting was, in my opinion, a mistaken tribute to one of Canada's earliest men of letters.

Paradoxically had Howe not belonged to a literary club and fancied himself so self-consciously as a man of letters *Western and Eastern Rambles* might have been a far better book. Its rivals, McCullough's *Stepsure Letters* and Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*, were shaped by religious, political, and social purposes so strong that the authors used all the human resources at their disposal to interest their readers in their work, which possesses an immediacy in language and a down-to-earth descriptive quality far removed from the manner of Howe's *Rambles*.

Howe had cut his teeth on the sententious moral essays of the eighteenth century (How he must have loved "The Visions of Mirzah"!) and he had digested the "picturesque" as put forward by the writers of gothic novels and travel books. He saw *Western and Eastern Rambles* as a kind of literary

1 Joseph Howe, *Western and Eastern Rambles*, Edited by M.G. Parks (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973).

“game” in which the material provided a pretext for allusive quotation of fashionable authors and for giving expression to a modish sensibility. His is the manner of a Mrs. Radcliffe as he describes a Truro landscape:

Following up a small stream which runs along a narrow strip of meadow that extends to the rear of the fields in the southern side of the village, as you recede from the cultivation and improvements of man, and approach the wildness and primitive negligence of nature, a sudden turn to the left shuts you out from the softened and beautiful scene of mingled meadow and woodland, and encloses you between two high ranges of land, that rise on each side of you as abrupt and precipitous as the waves of the Red Sea are said to have towered over the host of Pharaoh. The small stream is still murmuring at your feet, and pursuing its way sometimes over and occasionally under a luckless windfall that the violence of some Borean gust has stretched across its current. (pp. 135-136)

To the contemporary reader, the Nova Scotian landscape in the passage cited above appears *violated* by the facsimile of the language of literary Europe that the author uses to describe it, and there is little in *Western and Eastern Rambles* that is fresh and vivid enough to survive this treatment.

Joseph Howe's *Poems and Essays*, admirably introduced by M.G. Parks, is a much more satisfactory volume.² Howe plays, for the most part, his literary game, but he plays it with the materials normally associated with such a game. His sea-songs, his songs by the “noble savage”, his occasional poems are all gracefully executed in the manner of a slightly earlier fashion than current in the England of his day. In the prose essays, he shows off in a sensible, if limited way his command of literary allusion upon literary topics. He plays the game of *belles lettres* as skilfully as do most of the better Canadian academics who are having their literary effusions published in current periodicals. In his long poem *Acadia*, however, the problem which beset Howe in *Western and Eastern Rambles* recurs — it is the incongruity of the literary language with the frontier setting. Howe, however, almost redeems the poem by the energy and gusto of his verses.

In his life, Howe was no dilettante; in his literary work he was. It was his inability to treat writing other than a game that reduced to minor dimensions of achievement what was obviously a major literary potential. Nothing was further from the truth than his own epigram: “Poetry was the maiden I fell in love with but Politics was the hag I married”.

FRED COGSWELL

² Joseph Howe, *Poems and Essays*, Introduction by M.G. Parks (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973).