

The Fourteenth State

Poet Walter Hard's 'The Connecticut'

Tyler Resch

"The Connecticut: New England's Longest River" was published in 1947 as one of a series of "Rivers of America" books, which had been launched a decade earlier. This is a book of history written by a poet, Walter R. Hard Sr. (1882-1966) of Manchester, who became known nationally as one of the twentieth century's most eloquent American folk poets.

The "Rivers" series, indeed, was intended to be a literary effort written by novelists and poets, not historians. Envisioned at first to tell the full story of twenty-four rivers, the series ultimately expanded to sixty-five books over thirty-seven years. The last was published in 1974; some of them are reported to be highly collectible.

While Walter Hard's six books of poetry are known for their easy readability and clarity of content, as a writer of prose he is clearly well informed but has no special regard for sources, and no footnotes. This is a book to be read with pleasure and not for historical documentation, though there is a bibliography and an index. It's said that Hard worked on it for seven years.

Hard's description of what he finds along banks of the Connecticut River varies from sketchy to surprisingly detailed. In Vermont, for example, he glides lightly along many subjects that one would expect to find in greater depth: Samuel Morey's steam-driven boats, Daniel Webster at Dartmouth, Consul Jarvis's introduction of sheep, the covered bridge that Saint-Gaudens saw from his studio, the power generated at the Great Falls, the Estey organ that made Brattleboro famous.

Moving southerly through Massachusetts he touches upon Deerfield, where blood was shed; the industrial towns of Chicopee, Holyoke, and Springfield; and the four prominent colleges. Then he pauses for a lengthy chapter, virtually a biography, on Mary Lyon, the early nineteenth-century educator of women and founder of Mount Holyoke College.

The author gives only a nod to the time Vermont sued New Hampshire over just where the state boundary should be located. The Supreme Court agreed with where King Charles II placed it, at the west bank. Hard's only comment is that therefore Vermont must pay the costs of damage done by high water.

In Connecticut his focus, among many other interesting matters, is on the great migration of 1636 when Windsor, Wethersfield, and Hartford were all settled, along with Springfield, Mass. The reader will learn of the origins of tobacco agriculture in the Connecticut Valley, which supposedly began when Col. Israel Putnam returned from a visit to Havana in 1797. Then special seeds from Maryland led to the development of the broad-leaved tobacco and a regional industry that was much more vibrant in Walter Hard's day than now.

My edition of "The Connecticut" belonged to my mother-in-law and was published in 1947 but a newer 2003 edition is said to contain updated information. Other books in this series of interest to Vermont are "The Housatonic: Puritan River" by Chard Powers Smith (1894-1977), who lived in Arlington, and "The Hudson" by Carl Carmer (1893-1976), an upstate New York folklorist and one of the editors of this series on American rivers.

This column is intended to revisit some of the books, past and present, that tell the history of Vermont. Tyler Resch is the research librarian of the Bennington Museum, reachable at tresch@benningtonmuseum.org.

