

The Fourteenth State

Twenty essays describe ‘the new Vermont’

By Tyler Resch

If you are disheartened by stories of poverty, drug abuse, and crime in today’s Vermont, you may be cheered by a recently published book of uplifting essays that describe an up-and-coming progressive state. The Vermont Historical Society and Woodstock Foundation have jointly produced “The Vermont Difference: Perspectives from the Green Mountain State,” a hefty paperback printed on coated stock, weighing in at three pounds, and enlivened by an adroit selection of color photographs.

Twenty prominent players in academic, cultural, political, and economic leadership have contributed eighteen essays that portray “the new Vermont,” where a strong sense of place blends innovation and tradition.

One little problem is that a reader could easily conclude that Vermont is a place bounded on the north by Canada and on the south by Route 4. For with the exception of one essay on the creative arts by the president of Marlboro College and another by David Donath of Woodstock, one of the book’s four editors, who writes about the packaging and selling of the Vermont image, relatively little is acknowledged of uplifting or creative endeavors in Bennington, Windham, Windsor, or Rutland counties.

Regardless, the essays are well crafted and worthy of thoughtful attention. Here are some quick samples: Tom Salmon, the former Democratic governor who also served as president of UVM, offers a most informative rundown on Vermont’s history of higher education, public and private, though he laments the low level of state support for the public colleges. Jim Douglas, the former Republican governor, who was elected to four terms in a Democratic state, documents a long tradition of bipartisanship and civility. He salts his essay with a couple of memorable historical anecdotes.

Roberta MacDonald, whom Governor Madeleine Kunin named the first state marketing director and who now holds that job with the Cabot Creamery, offers a dynamic view of the Vermont brand. “Our state is known nationally and internationally as a naturally pristine destination,” she writes. “We need to appreciate that the great outdoors is the crux of our brand.”

Art Cohn of the Champlain Maritime Museum in Ferrisburg traces his program that has explored, retrieved, and reproduced vessels from the bottom of the lake dating to the American Revolution. Cohn makes the point

that this enriching enterprise enhances an important sense of place. Sam Hemingway of the Burlington Free Press profiles Vermont's major political figures – think Stafford, Kunin, Jeffords, Dean, Leahy, Sanders – ever since Philip H. Hoff in 1962 became the first Democratic governor in more than a century. Sam gives the subject a nice gloss of civility and nonpartisanship.

Tom Slayton, the veteran Vermont Life editor, reviews two hundred years of the state's literature and concludes that the state has had a transformative impact on writers. Peter Gilbert of the state humanities council traces the long and remarkable history and growth of literacy and education of all kinds, and comments on the duality of Vermonters who notably combine brains and brawn. In a similar vein, author-professor Frank Bryan contends that Vermont's tough topography and harsh winters have served to stiffen spines and produce inhabitants of special character.

Those are brief samples of the contents of a book that emphasizes the positive and progressive nature of today's Vermont. It's worth a read.