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A SPECIAL ISSUE

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DEO VOLENTE LABOR PROFICIT

Reviewed by Frank Bryan



HILL'S COUNTRY

CONTRARY COUNTRY: A CHRONICLE OF VERMONT

BY RALPH NADING HILL

RINEHART & COMPANY

CLOTH, 1950

AS A VERMONT PATRIOT FIRST and academic second, I begin any professional volume by consulting the index. Is Vermont listed? When I first read Arnold Toynbee's classic *A Study of History* (1946), I was appalled to discover that Vermont was not. When I turned to pages referencing New England, it got worse. Here Vermont was indeed mentioned but only, as Ralph Nading Hill put it when he took Toynbee to task in *Yankee Kingdom* (1960), as an "offshoot" of New York.

Part of New York! Keyriste!

The horror continued. "When we think of New England and the part it has played in American history we are thinking of only three of its five little states—of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island," quoth the eminent historian. Was it a typo or did he still believe in 1946 that Vermont was a county in New York?

As an unrepentant Yankee redneck I am tempted to respond:

"Yeah?"

"Try thinking THIS!"

"That's why your Red Coat ancestors hauled their sorry asses out of



Boston in 1777 just ahead of cannon fire from guns snatched from the British Empire when a Vermonter named Ethan Allen and a few dozen (soon to be drunken on His Majesty's rum) Green Mountain Boys captured the largest manmade fortification in the colonies (His Majesty's Fort Ticonderoga) well before the signing of the Declaration of Independence."

Still.

I owe Toynbee. He made another, an even more profound mistake and in so doing provided the perfect foil for this essay. Although historians are leery of causation (few claim to be scientists), the best use the scientific method—theory, hypothesis, test. Toynbee was no exception. And he got the theory right. As he put it, the three northern states of New England are above the "optimum climatic area" of the North American continent. Fair enough. It is too cold in Vermont. The frost runs too deep. Autumn ends too soon. Spring comes too late. The black flies are too thick, soil too rocky, hills too numerous and steep. The loneliness is too pervasive.

But the hypothesis based on his geographical theory of history flowed in the wrong direction.

The geography and attendant atmospheric variables of northern New England were causative all right. They are the primary reason that this area produced a profoundly creative, resilient, and, yes, fundamentally democratic (balancing community and liberty) culture. It has contributed—person for person—more to the American experience than any other region of America.

To understand the inner workings of this (one may think) crazily bold notion, one is inclined to cite the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and his "frontier thesis" of American history. Indeed, Vermont (the only one of the *six* New England states without a seacoast) fits the model perfectly. If ever there were empirical evidence for the Turner thesis it is Vermont; for Vermont was America's first frontier—with a nod to eastern Kentucky, which vied with Vermont to become the fourteenth state. Not only has Turnerism survived the ebb and flow of the revisionist industry, it now is showing up on the communitarian right (or is it left?).

Harvard's Robert Putnam, for instance, in his new (and controversial) work on diversity and community is suggesting that integration of diverse groups works best in the context of imposed necessity: the Catholic Church

threatening both Irish and Italians with hell if they don't kneel down together, evangelical Christians (black and white and side by side) singing lustfully from the same pews in Houston, the military integrating in small groups successfully—especially successfully under fire. Daniel Kemmis relates the same message from the great plains of Montana: When the cost of space and manpower are dear and bring families together that otherwise might not like each other much, cooperation (therapeutic and lasting) results. Growing up in farming (dairy) country in Vermont I saw the same thing happen again and again. Men and women had different tasks, basically arranged by physical strength. But let a thunderhead threaten a hay crop and all that is forgotten. "Mary! Drive this damn truck and Sally and I will load!"

The title of Ralph Nading Hill's earlier book, *Contrary Country* (1950), may thus seem strange for a book (my all-time favorite about Vermont) I claim contains a defense of democracy and a calculus with which to resuscitate the nation. How does contrarianism support community? For Hill did not write *Contrary Country* to celebrate community. He wrote it to honor individualism. But in the process there emerges (almost mystically) an incandescent cipher and by the last chapter one is prone to say: "Yes. Now I understand."

Understand what? Understand Vermont's state motto, "Freedom and Unity," the only state motto that is so clearly an oxymoron. It is from this contradiction that democracy springs. For democracy is neither liberty nor community. It is both—an agreement to get along together wrapped in a process that lets it happen. The process, the town meeting, was brought to Vermont by the English. Its antecedents were both religious (the Congregational Church) and economic (like the Mayflower Compact and meetings of landholding "proprietors" to whom the towns of Vermont were first granted by the king's representatives in southern New England).



The first town meeting to be held in my hometown of Newbury, Vermont, for instance, was held by the town's proprietors in a tavern in Newburyport, Massachusetts. The process may have been an import but the agreement to live by its results was not. It was imposed by the bit-

ter physical conditions under which America's first pioneers lived. To wit, when the townsmen of a town met face-to-face, each with a vote, to deliberate the laying out of a town road or the location of a schoolhouse, real consequences ensued. Town meeting was not for sissies. The imperative was simple. Cooperate or die.

To read Ralph Nading Hill's series of profiles of the people involved in a society based on this communal, town-meeting process is to see how it works to build a profound skepticism of "majorities" otherwise fashioned and a healthy respect for minorities caught within the vortex of distant decisions over which one has little or no control. Hill, who was a historical troubadour of the first order, summarizes this ethic by quoting men like Walter Coates, a hill-town writer:

"Is there a lost cause? Then I am for it. Is there a philosophy of life and destiny weak and rejected of men? Then will I examine and tolerate and, if needs be, defend that philosophy in its extremity. . . . Yes, write me down as one who abhors a sham, one who resists limitations, who despises cant; as one who will condemn repression and intolerance of every sort . . . who, for these reasons, and because of an inherent tendency of personality, was ever, and will ever be, ONE OF THE MINORITY."

And women like Walter Hard's "straight-backed Grandma Westcott, who went to a revival meeting out of curiosity, and when the evangelist stopped at her seat and said in a sepulchral tone: 'Sister, are you a Christian?' she gave herself a twist and sat up more straight than ever. 'Not in this church, I ain't.'"

It was Ethan Allen, remember, who published the first anti-Christian book on the North American continent.

Since prediction is the soul of science, Hill, it turns out, was a bit of a social scientist himself. In the beginning of *Contrary Country*, Hill calls Vermont a "never-never land of eternal Republicanism." Indeed, while Vermont filled over 300 statewide electoral offices between 1858 and 1958, no Democrat was elected to any of them. No state was more Republican than Vermont. When the Depression struck and brought with it the New Deal Democratic coalition that controlled national politics for nearly half a century, Vermont never flinched. At the end of *Contrary Country* Hill notes: "If the rest of the states go Republican, that would be the day Vermont would go Democratic." His prediction, while not perfect, was, as social science goes, damned good.

Contrary Country is a splendid memorial to Walter Coates and Grandma Westcott and people everywhere who understand that now and then a particular kind of hero appears on the pages of history—one whose character is profoundly humane, whose actions are unrepentantly contrarian, and whose spirit is magnificently optimistic. These men and women know the power and, indeed, the morality of the incandescent obscene gesture raised on high to flabbergast and annoy the established order. They march across

the pages of Hill's book. My favorite is the chapter on Matthew Lyon, the "scourge of aristocracy" who was in jail in Vermont on charges of violating portions of the Federalists' Alien and Sedition Acts when elected to Congress. His exploits—all framed by the realities of small-scale community life on a continuing frontier—were audaciously humane, independent, and optimistic.

Lyon's life ended after a 3,000-mile, three-month flatboat trip on the Mississippi River and the White River in Arkansas (a detour to see his family at Eddyville). He finally reached his newest project, a settlement at Spadra Bluffs, with materials from New Orleans. Much of the trip was upstream and his men recalled "he was usually the first to jump into the icy water when it was necessary to pull the flatboat across the shallows." He was 73 years old. He died shortly after his arrival. As Hill puts it, the old warrior's machinery simply "stopped functioning."

Pulling upstream, against the current in icy waters; I promised a "calculus to resuscitate the nation" and this is it: upstream against the forces of centralization in the icy waters of uniformity. History is not linear. Its horizons now gleam with the possibility (driven primarily by the technology of postmodernism) of recreating Jefferson's ideal of the "little Republic." There is a "gates of the mountains" in the far-off dreams of democracy. A revolution of scale awaits us there, whereby the tide of human events will return home to the small community. America is starving for want of citizens—human beings that know how to be contrarian in the context of community. Such democracy-literate citizens can only be raised at home. Without them the Republic will die. In short, it is time to return power to the localities. Not only will public policy be infinitely better if conceived and implemented at that level, in the process of hammering out local decisions true citizenship will be forged: the kind of citizenship capable of judging and electing the leadership necessary to sustain the center in the many, critical areas of public policy that must remain there.

Whenever I get discouraged about the possibilities of saving America as a fundamentally democratic republic, I am apt to turn to *Contrary Country*.

If it can be done once, it can be done again.

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