

Oregon Historical Quarterly, Vol. 115, No. 3 (Fall 2014), pp. 450-451

Here on the Edge: How a Small Group of WWII Conscientious Objectors Took Art and Peace from the Margins to the Mainstream by Steve McQuiddy
(Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, 2013. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 336 pages. \$24.95 paper.)

Here on the Edge is an engaging and beautifully written history. The “edge” McQuiddy documents is the work of members of the fine arts and tree-planting work camp of World War II objectors at Camp #56 in Waldport, Oregon. The move to the mainstream he traces is of Waldport’s painters, musicians, writers, printers and actors descending on post-war San Francisco and mixing with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Together, the Beats and Waldport’s “conchies” (conscientious objectors) shaped the San Francisco arts renaissance and, ultimately, the 1960s counterculture where pacifism, as argued by McQuiddy, became mainstream.

Although I have some background in this topic, I learned much from McQuiddy’s extensive research and capable handling of complex historical strands. Even more, I was deeply moved by the story of resistance and transformation McQuiddy has spun from oral histories, books, articles, manuscripts, and original interviews. He captures the stunning intentionality of people with outrageous goals and their unlikely impact. It made me ache for a similar possibility. But that is the book’s larger point.

Based on conviction and hard work, these people created their own possibilities under seemingly impossible conditions. As the book sketches, the WWII alternative service camps were products of the deplorable treatment of war resisters during WWI. The Historic Peace Churches (Brethren, Mennonite, and Quaker) worked with the U.S. government and pressed for change, resulting in the recognition of a conscientious objector status and the establishment of alternative service camps. The government provided the 150 sites, often former New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps, and assigned work duties. Everything else for the 12,000 men classified and assigned by the Selective Service to “do work of national importance” was paid for and organized by the Peace Churches — their food, clothes, education, entertainment, everything (p. 14). It was an unlikely and at times unwieldy alliance, made more so by the occupants themselves.

The camp “inmates” were drawn from all walks of life, all parts of the country, unified only in their opposition to war. Camp #56 was distinctively diverse. Most men were fresh off their family farms, having gained their convictions from their religious training. But a strategic few at Waldport were accomplished poets, painters, or musicians, often secular or political in their opposition to war and dedicated to pursuing their arts for the purpose of peace. McQuiddy details the inevitable rubs between the groups but captures their dynamics, unlikely alliances, and mutual learning, an important topic in its own right.

The Waldport artists decided it was not enough to simply do their assigned treeplanting work and bide their time until the war’s conclusion. Led by poet William Everson, the group focused on what they and the world would need when the violence ended. Working fifty hours a week

planting trees, fighting fires, and crushing rock, by night the Fine Arts Group produced a body of work — paintings, poetry, books, plays — that influenced other camps and the outside art and intellectual scene. They found printing machines, learned typesetting, and created innovative publications. They built sets, rigged salt-water light dimmers, and staged cutting-edge plays. Painters built beach lean-tos where they produced breathtaking canvases. And they philosophized, argued, drank with, and loved one other, discussing what they believed, and what they needed and wanted to achieve. Through this, they created not only a bond amongst themselves but also ties to the broader world and the basis, if not a clear plan, for their postwar passions and labors.

McQuiddy does a good job of placing this story in a broader societal context, most of which I learned from and agreed with. A few turns I found a bit too brief or strained. I would have appreciated McQuiddy's critical eye applied equally to U.S. government aims in WWII as he did with WWI. The author's "at any rate" transition from an artist's personal sexual struggles to broader social goals seemed strained. I am also not sure I interpret the future silent majority text as McQuiddy does. These, however, are very minor criticisms about an important book I have enthusiastically recommended to friends and colleagues and find myself contemplating with respect to my own life.

Johanna Ogden
Portland, Oregon