

Monadnock, More than a Mountain

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Book's companion web site:

www.monadnockmountain.com

Book Review: By Sally A. Roberts

Although I have hiked Mount Monadnock before, in the fall of 2002, as the final leg in completing the entire Metacomet Trail, which begins in Meriden, Connecticut to the Massachusetts border, then continues as the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail across Massachusetts to Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire, my most recent trek to the summit in March of 2008, was more than a hike – it was an adventure etched indelibly in my soul, as I felt I was hiking not merely a mountain but a personality surrounded by centuries of colorful history. It truly was “More than a Mountain.”

It was bitterly cold on March 9, 2008 when the small band of us trudged our way through considerable snow and ice. The grey sky warmed to no more than 15 degrees and with the wind blowing at 20-30 miles per hour the wind chill at the summit was below zero. It was so cold our water bottles froze. But rather than dwell on the cold, my thoughts were more on the centuries of hikers who had braved their way to the summit, on the untold number of Monadnockers who had rallied around the country and fought valiantly to save the mountain from developers, and of the many artists, poets, writers and dancers who had expressed their enchantment with the mountain in a multitude of ways. Monadnock had become more than a mountain - it was personality, a living thing. “Monadnockers” is the term coined for those who fall under its spell.

The history of Monadnock is portrayed vividly in a new book, published in 2007, written by Craig Brandon: Monadnock, More than a Mountain. I had just finished reading this book before the March hike. In fact, I even brought it with me on the drive up so I could share it with the others in our group of hikers. On the way up the mountain, we encountered the marker for the Halfway House, a three-story hotel located on the west side of the mountain at the end of a mile-long toll road. The first Halfway House opened in 1860. The hotel burned to the ground in 1954. The book has nearly 100 pictures, including many old and rare photos never before published. There are old photos of Mountain House guests with horse and buggy from about 1870.

Now that Japan's Mount Fuji has a paved road with bus service to the top, Monadnock can justifiably and proudly assert its claim as the most climbed mountain in the world. That equates to 100,000 hikers every year. It is 3,165 feet above sea level. On a clear day, from the summit you can see parts of all six New England states and 100 miles in every direction. The panorama takes in the Prudential Tower in Boston, Newburyport Harbor, Mount Washington in the north, Stratton and the Green Mountains to the west, and parts of the Berkshires including

Mount Greylock.

To the Native American legends have been added, in recent centuries, more than 60 poems and dozens of paintings that are in museums around the world. There are even operas, symphonies, waltzes and Morris dances written about it. Craig Brandon's book does not concern itself with how to hike the mountain. More than enough guidebooks and maps are now available, in print or the internet. The heart of this book is why so many hike the mountain, and why so many retain a special attachment to the mountain long after their visit.

It is a history of the inspiration part of hiking rather than the perspiration. But there is plenty of the later detailed in the book. The early explorations and the eccentrics are stories we may have heard and are carefully recounted here. The more critical message to be gleaned is the amount of persistence, diligence, and hard work it has taken over the centuries to preserve this magical place for future generations. Many dedicated "Monadnophiles" have spent thousands of hours and thousands of dollars protecting it from development. The PVHC and its members know the labor and resources that go into maintaining just a portion of the M&M Trail. An entire mountain? That's a LOT of work.

Hundreds of painters, poets, writers, composers, choreographers and photographers have responded to the call to transform Monadnock into art. The list of those who answered that artistic call includes Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Arlington Robinson, Mark Twain, H.P. Lovecraft, Amy Lowell, Rockwell Kent, Galway Kinnell, Willa Cather, Rudyard Kipling, Alan Havhannes, Abbot Thayer and William Phelps.

Ralph Waldo Emerson put Monadnock on the literary map with his long 1846 poem *Monadnoc*. This is one of Emerson's most famous poems, setting out the Transcendentalists' view of nature as something that humans can use as a teacher. Emerson was the most popular poet, essayist and philosopher of his day and his endorsement of the mountain brought the literary and intellectual leaders of the day to vacations at the Halfway House for a generation after his death. Emerson's poetry transformed it into the noblest mountain in literature. Poet Robert Lowell called Monadnock the country's "most literary mountain."

Henry David Thoreau made four trips to Monadnock between 1852 and 1860 and wrote the most complete description of the mountain that exists for the 19th century. The account in his journal is one of the most famous descriptions of Monadnock and has made the mountain a part of American literature. Among the frequently visited places on the mountain are "Thoreau's Seat" and "Emerson's Seat," named after Concord Transcendentalists Thoreau and Emerson. The names on the "seats," however, are entirely honorary. It's highly unlikely that either Thoreau or Emerson ever sat on their "seats."

Abbott Thayer was one of the most famous artists in American when he moved to Dublin Lake in 1890 and helped found the Dublin Art Colony. He painted Monadnock as a white snow-covered triangle against the blue sky. That painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But he was also a leader in the movement to save the mountain from developers in the 1911-1915 period. When he died his ashes were spread on the summit.

Raphael Pumpelly was a world-famous explorer and a professor of geology at Harvard who spent his summers on the southern shore of Dublin Lake. His property bordered on the mountain and in 1884 he blazed a trail from his house to the summit that still carries his name. The Pumpelly Trail is considered the most scenic and interesting on the mountain, and is nine miles round trip. He also built a rock house near the summit that he shared with Thayer's son Gerald.

Developers have threatened to build structures on Monadnock for over a century. Each time grass roots Citizens Groups successfully saved the mountain. Without their hard work Monadnock would be full of mansions, a radio antenna, a tramway, a highway up the side and clear cut forests where the state park is located. Philip Ayres, the chief forester for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, spent thousands of hours between 1911 and 1915 tracking down the ancestors of the "Masonian heirs" who owned the summit of Monadnock to persuade them to sign over their property rights to save the mountain from developers. Allen Chamberlain, the author of *Annals of the Grand Monadnock* in 1936 and assistant to Ayres in securing property rights to the summit of Monadnock, was the mountain's spokesman for the latter part of his life. He lectured around the country about how important it was to save the mountain.

Grenville Clark was a life-long advocate of civil rights and world government and a Wall Street lawyer who spent his summers in Dublin. In 1944, when a Keene radio station announced that it planned to build a radio tower and tramway to the summit, Clark went into action to stop the project. Working mostly behind the scenes he wrote hundreds of letters to influential people and raised thousands of dollars. He obtained an option on the Halfway House property, which effectively halted the process until the FCC killed it.

Monadnock has become an icon, almost like a grail that pilgrims come to visit. The elements of simplicity, beauty, majesty, and strength are blended into the atmosphere of a great cathedral. It becomes more than a mountain, where pilgrims may come for inspiration, comfort or repose. Perhaps the secret to Monadnock's siren call and popularity is not that it is all things to all people, but that it relates to people in individual ways. For those who know it best, Monadnock has become a part of their lives and it has always served as a refuge during troubled times. That helps to explain why it became a popular place after the World Trade Center towers fell in 2001. Within days, the summit was covered in flags and local people turned to Monadnock to help them respond.

Craig Brandon's new book magnificently portrays the panorama of history surrounding Monadnock. You will be enchanted by Brandon's *Monadnock: More than a Mountain*.

I confess that I have fallen under Monadnock's spell and have humbly joined the army of "Monadnophiles."

Paintings can be viewed online at <http://www.monadnockmountain.com/paintings.htm>.
Poems can be read at: <http://www.monadnockmountain.com/poetry.htm>