



The Barnard Bulletin

AUGUST 2021

Vol. XXXVI No. 8

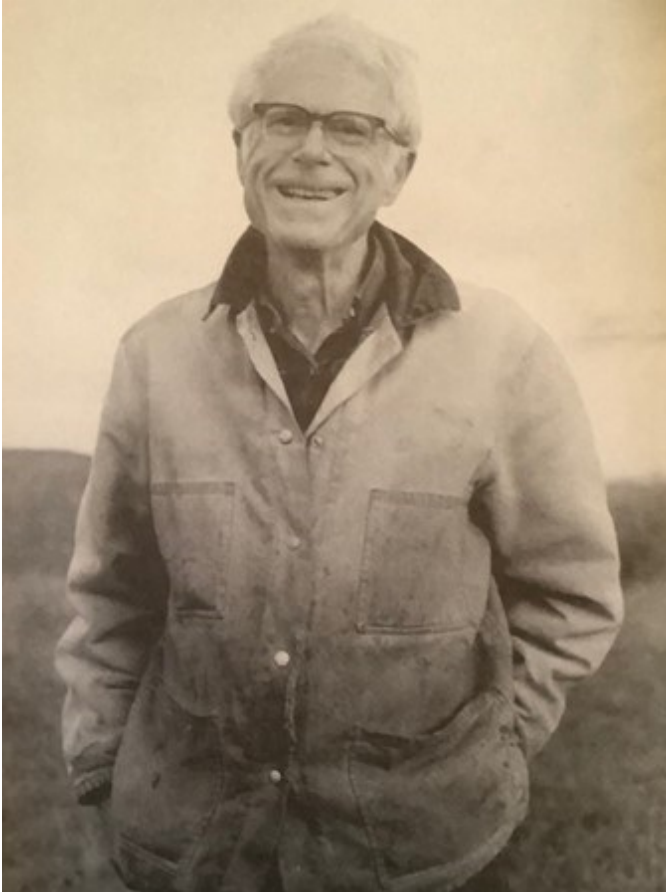
A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

Noel Perrin

1927 – 2004



Noel Perrin on his farm in Thetford Center, Vermont, c. 2000

Noel Perrin, always called Ned, was born in New York City to parents who earned their living as advertising copywriters, and he was educated as someone destined for a life of books and writing. He attended the Woodbury Forest School in Virginia, majored in English Literature at Williams College, and earned his Masters degree in English at Duke University in 1950. He took a break—serving with distinction in the Korean war—then studied further at Cambridge, was briefly a Fulbright professor of English in Poland, was twice a Guggenheim Fellow, taught widely, wrote constantly, and joined the Dartmouth College faculty in 1984. His special interests as a teacher were environmental studies and poetry, especially the poetry of Robert Frost.

All during his academic career, Perrin was busy writing mostly first person essays that appeared in many publications. One of his twelve books was *A Reader's Delight*, a 1988 collection of the columns he wrote for *The Washington Post*. His interests were wide-ranging—

from expurgated books in English and the skills of magicians, to the medieval history of Britain and Japanese swords. But one could say his writing career really began in 1963, when he bought his perpetual inspiration: an 85-acre farm in Thetford Center, Vermont.

Perrin gave credit to a mentor named Walter Hard, Jr., only son of a well-regarded Vermont poet, who was editor of *Vermont Life* magazine from 1950 to 1972.

When I first met [Hard] in 1961, I had been living in rural Vermont for one year. I still supposed myself to be an urbane writer, if no longer an urban one. I had plenty to say about Clos de Vougeot, absolutely nothing to say about cows. When Walter got through with me, I still had nothing to say about cows—but I was writing freely about cider and maple syrup. And I had discovered that it was almost as much pleasure to write about these things as it was to press the one and boil the other. (from the 1983 “Foreword” to *Third Person Rural*)

Perrin reveled in the rural life. He never thought of himself as anything other than a dabbler, an amateur, a “sometime farmer”—“sometime” being his word for it. But he brought to farming the very keen eye of an infatuated city boy.

A farmer’s world contracts in the winter to little more than his barn and his woodlot. Because I had no cows in my barn last winter, and hence no warmth, mine shrank to just the woodlot. The barn was still there, loaded to the gills (truck, tractor, many ranks of firewood, even a car we were storing for a friend), but bitterly cold. Even on sunny days, no one ever went in it except to get firewood or start the tractor. When I felt the desire to hang around a barn and be comfortable, I went over to my neighbor Floyd’s. There the two milkers and the eight beef cattle keep the temperature a comfortable sixty-five and the humidity high. The pigs are stretched out on their stomachs in their pen, like tourists on the beach in Florida, and Floyd’s new black calf is over in a corner waiting to have her neck tickled. That barn is a little piece of summer. (from “In Winter in the Woods,” 1980, *Second Person Rural*)

Question: Why is Vermont more beautiful than New Hampshire? Answer: Because of Vermont farmers. Remove the farmers, and within ten years New Hampshire would surge ahead. This is a serious argument. If you just consider natural endowment, the two states are both fortunate, but New Hampshire is more fortunate. It has taller mountains, it

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Perrin - Cont. from front page

has a seacoast, it even owns the whole northern reach of the Connecticut River, except a little strip of mud on the Vermont side. But New Hampshire's farmers mostly quit one or two generations ago and started running motels and selling real estate. The result is that most of New Hampshire is now scrub woods without views. Dotted, of course, with motels and real estate offices. However, a lot of Vermont farmers are holding on. (from "Grooming Bill Hill," 1977, *First Person Rural*)

All writers stand back from their subjects—they must. And Perrin stood back to admire the farming life, unapologetic in being new to every aspect of it. He eagerly befriended his farmer neighbors and became an avid student of all they could teach.

For the first year or two that I lived in the country, I believed firmly in the stereotype. City people talk a lot, the belief goes, but rubes are close-mouthed. I have since come to realize that words can fly as fast in the country as in town. It's just that rural conversation operates under a rather peculiar set of rules. And the rules do impose certain silences... The most important rule is the one that's descended from the work ethic. It says that conversation should never be sought for itself, but should just sort of happen. Deliberately to plan some occasion when you do nothing but talk (e. g., a cocktail party) is certainly foolish and probably immoral. The best way to let it happen is to share a job with someone. *That* you can plan—a quilting bee or a barn raising is just fine—but officially you're there to work on the quilt, or nail rafters. And if there happens to be a steady stream of conversation while you stitch or pound, well, you're just as surprised as everybody else. You came to work. (from "Vermont Silences," *Second Person Rural*)

Midwest farmers—most of them anyway—have a boring time with fence posts. When they need some more, they just open the Sears catalogue and order another five hundred metal ones...Then they lay out one hundred or so in a straight line across the prairie, and start stringing wire. New England is different. Within a mile or two of my house, I can look at fences strung on eleven different kinds of posts. Bud Palmer, who runs the garage in the village, has a horse pasture fenced with pine. Ellis Paige uses mostly split oak to restrain his Angus cattle. Barbara Duncan keeps her goats behind a mixture of oak and maple saplings. George deNagy uses hemlock for Push and Pull, his team of work ponies. Warren DeMont has metal posts. Not

from Sears, but salvaged from a floodplain the Government took over a few years ago. Floyd Dexter, the best fencer of us all, uses entirely sharpened cedar posts. Except when he runs out in the middle of a job, that is, and then he's been known to use cherry, tamarack, lever wood—almost anything except popple or elm. (from "In Search of the Perfect Fence Post," 1977, *First Person Rural*)

Finally, having spent some years getting used to his farm, Perrin decided to stop having "nothing to say about cows." In his essay "Birth in the Pasture," he describes at length a morning he spent looking everywhere for his pregnant cow who had been close to calving the evening before. He and his helpful neighbor had been searching the pastures for hours when they narrowed their focus to the one place left, Bill Hill.

Bill Hill is about two hundred feet high, and practically vertical. I hadn't even considered looking up there, because I took it for granted that a 287-day pregnant cow would not be able to climb up, especially when she's got a dilated uterus and stiff legs...We clamber up. The pasture fence runs parallel to the top of Bill Hill and there are several bushy little glades right along the fence line. In one of these, Michelle is lying. It's about as private a delivery room as you could ask for, and delivery has just begun. Michelle has already passed the water sack that helped to dilate her, and she is having contractions about every three minutes. Each time she does, we can see two tiny light-colored spots appear. They are baby hooves. (from "Birth in the Pasture," 1983, *Third Person Rural*)

Michelle successfully gives birth to a bull calf and begins to use her tongue to clean him head to tail. "As I watch," Perrin observes, "I begin to understand that old phrase about licking something into shape."

This was a man who lived in two worlds, who felt at ease in overalls and also in a tuxedo. "I remember the first time I met Ned," says Betsy Edmunds—she now lives in Woodstock, but for many years she lived on a Thetford farm adjacent to his. "I had been out in my garden and was wearing boots and a kilt, of all things, and I saw an amazing sight. A helicopter was flying very low over the trees of my woods that separated my farm from Ned's. It looked in trouble, as if it were about to crash." Consequently, Betsy ran frantically through the woods to see if she could help, aghast at the disaster unfolding. When she fell, she muddled herself, but recovered and rushed on, bursting out of the woods ...onto a sylvan scene. From the helicopter, which had landed sedately on a well-groomed lawn, stepped several well-groomed people. Out of the large, Federalist brick farmhouse, came their host, Mr. Perrin, with a number of other elegant guests, all carrying drinks and trays of food. "For an outdoor cocktail party," Betsy remembers. "And there I

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was, his first sight of me, looking a fright and yelling, ‘Yoo-hoo! I’m here to help!’ “

Perrin describes cutting the farmhouse Christmas tree, “a furry young spruce that had come up in the corner of the lower pasture.” It needed cutting because “what you want in a pasture is grass, not evergreens.” He describes everyone decorating the tree, then the start of a snow-storm, and a surprise visit from cousins who have come to sing carols and drink hot cider. Their car has slid off the road, but that’s a problem for later. The essay ends with this paragraph:

Then it was too beautiful to stay in. We found more candles. Eleven people and three dogs walked through the silent snow to the last house on the road...and sang “Good King Wenceslaus.” The eleven-year-old, who had been allowed to open one present early, and who had headed unerringly for his new bugle (he feels packages, and we suspect him of having a hidden x-ray machine) blew a sort of fanfare. It didn’t sound too bad in the soft snow. Then we got the farm truck and winched the cousins’ Bronco back onto the glistening road. Tomorrow would be as white as Christmas can get. (from “A Vermont Christmas,” 1989, *Last Person Rural*)

Such “elegies” for a privileged life abound in all Perrin’s work.

A writer who was also a husband, a father, a professor, and a farmer surely had very busy days. Ned Perrin over the course of his life had three wives and three daughters. He acknowledged that he spent half his time writing, half his time teaching, and half his time farming. That added up to three “halves,” by which analogy he meant to best the more common “burning the candle at both ends.”

Always a man of many interests, Perrin’s farming led him in far-thinking directions. Busy as he was, he found enough psychological leisure to contemplate the future with uncanny foresight—and from atop his ivory tower, he discovered an amazing view. He was one of the first environmentalists, one of the first to drive an early model of the electric car, one of the first to use solar power. He wrote persuasively about the need for land conservation.

All in all, Perrin reached his end feeling both satisfied and anguished. His increasing debility from a form of Parkinson’s disease necessitated his selling his beloved farm shortly before he died. He took his leave of it in an essay published posthumously.

There have been cows at Two of Everything Farm for about thirty of the forty-one years I was privileged to live there myself. Mostly they were guest cows; they came in June and stayed until October or maybe early Novem-

ber and day by day trimmed up whichever pasture they were in. For a few years I had a tiny herd of beef cattle, and that was the period when I felt most at home on the farm. I love cows, for their warm sweet breath, their sweet dispositions...and their insatiable curiosity. Once when my sister Bee was visiting, and we were making cider, the six guest heifers we had that year were lined up like the audience of a play. They stayed neatly in a row along the wire fence and did all but clap. I rewarded them with all the pomace from three one-bushel pressings.

As I move into exile—and that is how I see leaving the farm, the maple trees, the cattle, the wild turkeys—I am very clear that assisted living comes at a price. (from “Farewell to Thetford Farm,” 2004, *Best Person Rural*)

In the words of one of Perrin’s editors, Terry Osborne, “All of [his work] rings with passion, with a persistent love for the life he lived.” And in the words of Perrin’s literary idol, Robert Frost:

No memory of having starred
... keeps the end from being hard.*

*The lines quoted here from a Frost poem, belong to his “Provide, Provide.”

The Danforth Library will soon have a hardcover copy of *Best Person Rural*, published in 2006 by The Godine Press of Boston. The book is a collection of some of the best of Noel Perrin’s essays published in his lifetime, along with some if his work that remained unpublished at his death. The selection of what’s included was made by editor Terry Osborne.

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word “Church” could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message J = N. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"CJAIHJD LFRRU, H SJGRFULOJG
LWR PROJHJD AE MOLHRJBR.
CJAIHJD DFOUU, H BOJ
OMMFRBHOLR MRFUHULRJBR."
-WOT XAFTOJG

BARNARD 2021 TAX RATES

Town	State	State
Municipal	Homestead	Non-Homestead
0.4851	1.7326	1.7285

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the first Monday of the month at 7:00pm at the Town offices.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Wednesdays 3:00 - 5:00 p.m., Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi access available .

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

SELECTBOARD ASSISTANT, Rob Ramrath, select-board@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday & Tuesday, 8:00am-3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

YOGA CLASSES offered at Danforth Library, Mondays 9:00am - 10:30am with Amanda Anderson. Classes are by donation; for more information contact Amanda@innerliftyoga.com. Yoga Classes are also offered on Thursdays from 9-10:30 with Beth Umba. Contact Beth at: bethumba@gmail.com.

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
<https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore>

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click [here](#) for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm in 012 Oakes Hall, Vermont Law School. More information at <https://www.ecfiber.net/>

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

BARNARTS EVENTS SCHEDULE

Music On The Farm

July 22: The Blue Dahlia

July 29: Still Hill

August 5: Zikina

August 12: Twisted Pine

August 19: Kotoko Brass

Aug. 26: Myra Flynn & DonnCherie

September 2: Bow Thayer

September 9: Ida Mae Specker

September 16: Alisa Amador

September 23: Fiddle Witch

September 30: DJ Sean Mixkings

10th Anniversary Summer Youth Theater

August 6-8: Fiddler On The Roof

Haunted Village Theater, Oct 23-24, Barnard Village

Comming in Late Summer

Wasteland Public Radio: Well, That Happened

An original dystopian podcast written and performed by:

Erin Bennett

Maureen Hennigan

Aaron M. Hodge

Heather Howell

Peter Mendes

Will Moore

Daniel Patterson

Chris Peirce

Linda Treash

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"Knowing trees, I understand the meaning of patience.

Knowing grass, I can appreciate persistence.."

- Hal Borland

SLPC BAKE SALE THANK YOU

The Silver Lake Progressive Club was pleased that the rain on Saturday didn't depress the response to our appeal for baked goods. The wider community's offerings, added to the baked items from Club members, made a delicious display at the 2021 Independence Day Bake Sale. This traditional event, held yearly in conjunction with the Barnard Fire Department's barbecue and flea market, roared back from its pandemic cancellation last year. All of the Bake Sale money collected, plus several individual donations, will be added to the SLPC scholarship fund. The Club wishes to thank everyone who contributed.