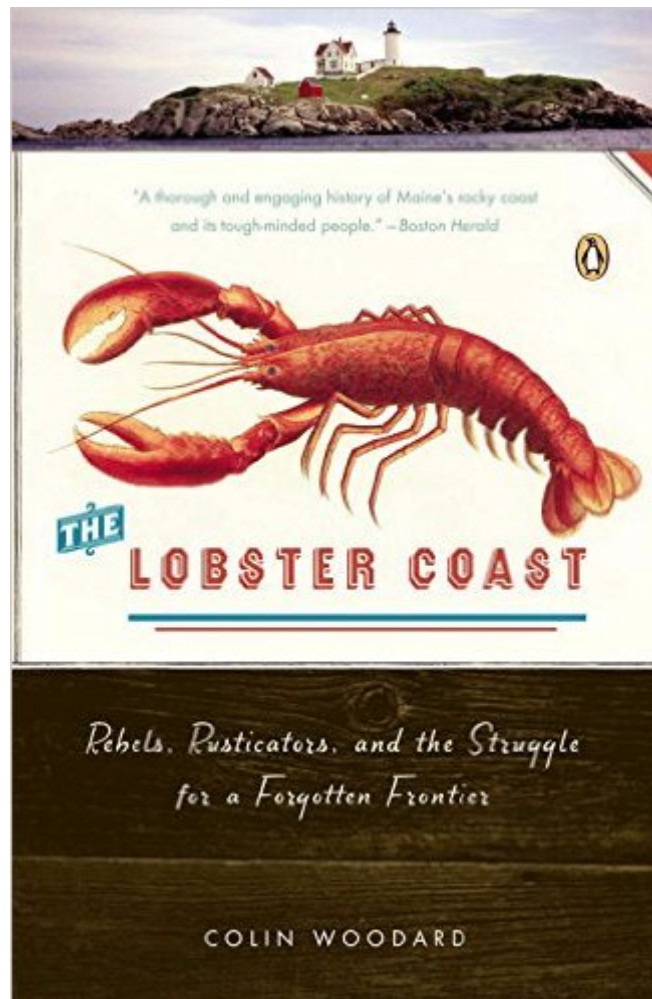


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The Lobster Coast: Rebels, Rusticators, And The Struggle For A Forgotten Frontier



Synopsis

A thorough and engaging history of Maine's rocky coast and its tough-minded people. "Boston Herald [A] well-researched and well-written cultural and ecological history of stubborn perseverance." "USA Today For more than four hundred years the people of coastal Maine have clung to their rocky, wind-swept lands, resisting outsiders' attempts to control them while harvesting the astonishing bounty of the Gulf of Maine. Today's independent, self-sufficient lobstermen belong to the communities imbued with a European sense of ties between land and people, but threatened by the forces of homogenization spreading up the eastern seaboard. In the tradition of William Warner's Beautiful Swimmers, veteran journalist Colin Woodard (author of *American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good*) traces the history of the rugged fishing communities that dot the coast of Maine and the prized crustacean that has long provided their livelihood. Through forgotten wars and rebellions, and with a deep tradition of resistance to interference by people from away, Maine's lobstermen have defended an earlier vision of America while defying the tragedy of the commons—the notion that people always overexploit their shared property. Instead, these icons of American individualism represent a rare example of true communal values and collaboration through grit, courage, and hard-won wisdom.

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Customer Reviews

The sky is truly falling on many fish species. Nets come up empty, and fish-based economies collapse. But the Maine lobster seems almost immune to such disaster; a growing number of Maine

lobstermen continue to haul in a grand 20 million pounds a year of delectable crustacean with no shortage looming on the horizon. Why? *The Lobster Coast: Rebels, Rusticators, and the Struggle for a Forgotten Frontier* by Colin Woodard explains how Maine lobstermen voluntarily conserve their lobster population and keep the industry sustainable. The stereotype of the Maine fisherman as stoic, independent and not easily impressed is apparently well deserved. Woodard suggests that Maine's lobsters benefit from small, traditional, often ancient, fishing communities that jealously guard their resource. Though anyone can theoretically obtain a license to fish for lobster in Maine, the pros protect their harbors from interlopers, snubbing neophytes with no ancestral ties to the community, and even vandalizing their traps. Maine lobstermen have also protected their lobster population by making the breeding female lobster almost sacred. Woodard lauds the lobstermen's practice of "V-notching" egg-bearing females-punching a small hole in their tail fins before releasing them back into the ocean. Notching is code for "Cherished breeder-not for sale." Lobstermen have agreed among themselves to throw back the V-notched lobsters-even when they are eggless. Maine's lobstering community also tosses back oversized male lobsters-a practice unique among fishing industries. Woodard writes ambitiously about the whole state of Maine and its history, starting with its pre-Pilgrim inhabitation by Europeans. Throughout his book, he keeps an eye on lobstering, the industry that has been the backbone of Maine's economy, the ever-present default option as other industries, such as ice and granite, failed. Woodard reports not only on the conflict between lobstermen and government scientists, but also on the friction between ancient lobster communities and encroaching suburbia-what he calls the "Massification" of southern Maine, i.e. the tendency of Boston professionals to sprawl northward, driving lobstermen out of their ancestral homes with tax increases, beach access restrictions and noise ordinances. Woodard's chapter, "The Triumph of the Commons," is, itself, a triumph. Science has declared that, by and large, shared natural resources are doomed to overharvesting, but Woodard shows how Maine's lobster community has defied that trend through religious self-regulation. Woodard takes as his focal point the beautiful and largely undeveloped Monhegan Island. On Monhegan, lobstermen have taken resource conservation a quantum step further: they only fish for lobsters December through June. Monhegan is not only a model of conservation; for Woodard, it is also a symbol of Maine and lobstering culture at its very best. Monhegan, he writes, is "an ancient, self-governing village, essentially classless and car-less, whose homes, sheds, and footpaths appear to have thrust themselves out of the wild and arrestingly beautiful landscape. . . . [B]eing immersed in it pulls at something deep within our civic being, a hint of a simpler, perhaps nobler world that might have been, but can never be again."

Despite having grown up in midcoast Maine, the focus of this book, and having had Maine history in school, I learned so much from this book! I had no idea how fascinating the history of coastal Maine was---perhaps because much of it is rather disturbing---not something they wanted to teach us in 6th grade! I also now understand much more about the attitudes I grew up with regarding those "from away". I learned that I was part of a huge migration into Maine in the early 70s---I had always known that most anyone in my class that was not native had moved to Maine the very same summer we did (summer of '72) but I never really realized why. I've been away from Maine for a while now, and this book opened my eyes to some of the recent changes there---how many now are moving to Maine that have no interest in really becoming part of the culture they find there. And of course, I also learned a great deal about lobstering. Growing up, about half the kids in my class had fathers who were lobstermen, but this book greatly increased my knowledge of their culture and of lobsters themselves. I can't recommend this book highly enough!!

After finishing the first short section, my first thought was that the book was a bit of a lightweight -- at best, a paperback to read while flying across the Atlantic. But when I got to the second section which filled in many of the historical gaps -- particularly the "why's" -- from Elizabethan England to the Pilgrims to the modern era, I realized how interesting this book really was. Anyone who enjoys travelogues will enjoy this book; perhaps you need to have visited Maine at least once or have some connection to the state, but if you do read it, you will learn much more about the history of the western world than the title suggests.

This is a very interesting and comprehensive history of Maine and the rest of New England, going back to the very first settlers of the rugged region. The book explores the dynamics of the various industries that rose and fell (in some cases very hard) throughout the last 400 years in Maine, and the people that gained and lost in the process. The most compelling part of the book in my opinion is the in depth look at the Indian Wars that ravaged the region as well as the fishing and lobstering industries in the last 150 years... but there's a little bit of noise throughout the book including a less-than-exciting part devoted to some of the author's personal early morning fishing trips. They are a valiant attempt to inject some modern day relevance into the book, but I found those anecdotes to be mildly distracting, because the history itself is actually really interesting. I'd recommend it to anyone who has been to or plans to travel to Maine, or who is interested in the lobstering trade, but its not "The History Of The Rise And Fall of The Holy Roman Empire"

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