

Manchester Disunited

Ten days after that space in time occupied by the triumph of the placeless Obama over the even more placeless McCain, 55 delegates, observers, and persons of

interest to the Department of Homeland Security gathered at the downtown Radisson in Manchester, New Hampshire to discuss ways by which they might leave the country while standing their ground. 'Twas the Third North American Secessionist Convention, hosted by the Middlebury Institute and its anarcho-witty director, Kirkpatrick Sale.

I drove to Manchester via Governor Dewey's New York State Thruway and President Eisenhower's Interstate and Defense Highway System—Republicans were into socialist giantism long before the Bushes burned. In the passenger seat sat Pat Weissend, curator of our local history museum and one of the nation's foremost grave hunters. (I told Pat I was going to report that he sang Air Supply tunes all the way to New Hampshire, but I cannot tell a lie. He did hum Bon Jovi—same difference.) En route we detoured to Natick, Massachusetts to find Henry Wilson, Grant's second vice president, and while I was sitting in a room the next day listening to rambling speeches in the momentarily radicalized Radisson, Pat was getting lost in Boston scouting out dead Unitarians. There are lots of them.

The conference was duller than those of previous years, perhaps because the imminent de-Ovalizing of George W. Bush has produced a collective sigh of relief. That will last until Secretary of State Clinton cheerleads the American war machine's bombing of some rag-tag Muslim country for its insufficiently feminist domestic policies.

At the convention, I was delighted to visit with my friend Carolyn Chute, the Maine novelist and voice of the rural poor, whose new novel, *The School on Heart's Content Road*, marks her very welcome return. I also joked around with the hearty Dexter Clark, the gold miner (proprietor of "Mining Our Own Business") and vice chairman of the Alaskan Independence Party, whose hardy crew of go-it-aloners has a fellow traveler in Alaska's First Family. Governor Sarah on the stump was no more a secessionist than Mitt Romney, but as Dexter points out, "she slept with an AIP member for seven years" and surely something rubbed off, so to speak.

The whiff of crackpottery trailed a handful of the delegates. They are easily mocked, though I prefer to spray whatever bile I produce at people who do real harm—Masters of War, Defilers of the Republic—than at a helium-voiced, 51-year-old, polyester-encased alien who fancies himself Ambassador from Uranus. Still, the disconnect from the reality-based community is unsettling.

A Texan boasted of turning his back when the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. Pledge author Francis Bellamy is a neighbor of ours, geographically if not temporally, who shared the totalitarian "Nationalist" philosophy laid out by his cousin Edward in the 1887 dystopian novel *Looking Backward*. But conspicuous displays of disrespect for the pledge, flag, or other symbols of the United States seem, to this sentimental American, bullheadedly bad ways to persuade

one's neighbors to consider the alternative. Anyone who has neighbors, and not just contempt for his neighbors, understands this.

I bleed sympathy for 51st state secessionists everywhere: Shasta California, Upstate New York, Yooper Michigan. As for those who want out of the U.S.—noncontiguous Alaska and Hawaii ought never to have been admitted (jigsaw-puzzle makers agree!) and only the most costive liberal or chickenhawk conservative could fail to be charmed by the Frost and maple syrup patriots of the Second Vermont Republic, which drips Vermontishness.

Over drinks I asked Kirk Sale if putting the gloriously, whimsically, seriously localist Vermonters on the same program as mad tinfoil hatters doesn't do the Green Mountain Boys a disservice. Kirk, author of enduring works on the Luddites and SDS, has roots in the New Left and an admirable distaste for edict-issuing. He says that purges and excisions smack of right-wing socialism and neoconnery (not to be confused with the Scottish Nationalist Sean Connery). Point taken. Still, the nut quotient this time was too high even for an indulgent sap like myself.

Saturday was my birthday, and Pat and I drizzled it away drinking New Hampshire beer (Smuttynose) in a dive bar while feeding the juke box to keep The Pogues in our ears.

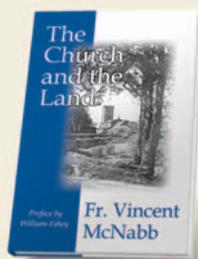
I met my love by the gas works wall
Dreamed a dream by the old canal
I kissed my girl by the factory wall
Dirty old town; dirty old town

The young drunks at the other end of the bar sang along, in love with their dirty old town on the Merrimack. To each his own. ■

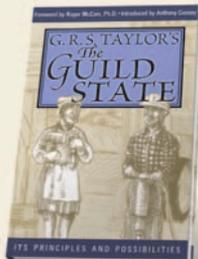
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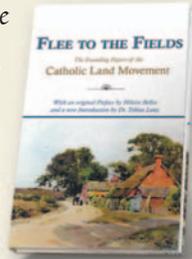
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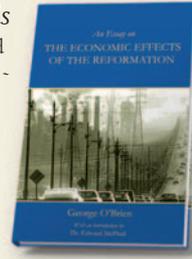
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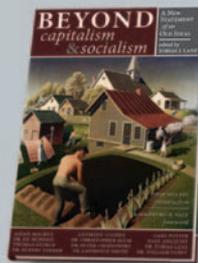
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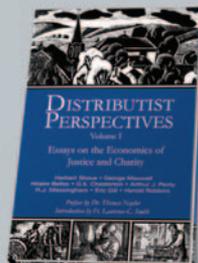
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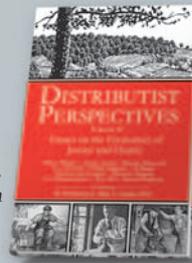
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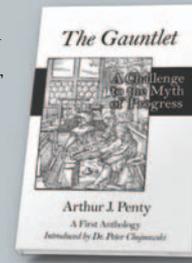
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