

October 5, 2017

REPORT ON THE MAINE HUTS & TRAILS TRIP

I took my EN 115/W1 class, "The Environmental Imagination," to the Stratton Brook Hut on September 22, 2017. The course was created under the auspices of the Center for Arts and Humanities, as one of the first Environmental Humanities courses sponsored by the Center. The focus of the writing intensive course is the ways in which humans have imaginatively constructed views of the non-human/nature, in literature, philosophy, art, religion, music, and architecture. At this point in the semester, the class had read excerpts in poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, with some particular attention given to Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin, as examples of types of nature writing.

The goal of the trip was to expose them to the Maine in which they hopefully will continue to reside for the next four years, and to give them material for a nature writing assignment which was to be generated by the experience, and due ten days later.

Two of the 16 students couldn't make the trip because of sports. The rest left from campus about 2pm on the 22nd. The second van was driven by my daughter, Harper Burke ('13), both a graduate of Colby and a veteran employee of the Maine Huts & Trails, from 2009-2012, and occasionally thereafter. Having a second person to walk the trail, and bring up the rear in case of stragglers, was essential. I chose Stratton Brook because it is a slightly more challenging walk than the other two Huts that are a reasonable distance from campus, and because of the sense of isolation at the top, and the views.

I was slightly concerned about the physical condition of some of the students on the trip, but in the event, they all handled the three-mile trail and 600 feet of elevation gain, very well. One of the blog comments on the trip refers to the virtues of having to take on this challenge and succeeding.

We arrived at the Hut about 5pm. After getting sorted, we had dinner, and after dinner we gathered in the screened-in porch to look at an excerpt from a contemporary piece of British nature writing. Then, I gave them the assignment for the essay (attached below), and set them off to do some note taking, which, surprisingly, they all carefully did. The staff of the Hut built a bonfire, and by 9pm, most people had gathered around the fire for the evening. Students reported that the last ones went to bed by midnight.

In the morning we had breakfast, some of us had a tour of the workings of the Hut, and two students decided to try out wood stacking. Early risers did more note-taking or drafting, or admired the dramatic views. We headed down the trail a little after 9am, and were back on campus by 12:30pm.

The staff at the Hut was excellent: helpful, interesting, but gave everyone their space. The food was plentiful and good, and the bunkhouses seemed to work out well for everyone; at least, I heard no complaints. For future trips, I have a few suggestions: doing this trip with first-years is a little problematic, or at least something to think about, as you have very

little idea about the character and condition of the students you get. We'd been together for about three weeks, so, unlike with an upper division course, an instructor will have had no experience or knowledge of these students. I had written to all of the students registered for the class late in August, to let them know this trip was going to be part of the course, so that if they weren't up to it they could transfer out (I had a huge wait list for the course). In addition, the first-years are naturally a little less mature. In this case, the students behaved beautifully, but that could easily not be the case with a different group. Also, I was worried about how the students would affect any other visitors to the Huts. Fourteen 18-year olds descending on people who were expecting a retreat, might not go well. In this case there were two couples already at the Hut and a single woman arrived by dinner time. I don't think our group bothered the five other adults, but future trips might consider the virtues of renting an entire Hut to avoid potential conflicts.

In sum, the trip went great, achieved what I was after (essays were just turned in yesterday), and the students both bonded and were suitably impressed by this kind of experience that Colby has to offer.

The students on the trip were:

Grace Andrews
Paul Ariola
Maddie Carlini
Lena Hanschka
Henry Heck
Nick Ho
Rosie Hust
Jack Koskinen
Whitney Nash
Jake Neeb
Kara Robak
Carter Robinson
Adi Shastry
Max Siegman

ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION TRIP TO STRATTON BROOK
Itinerary

Friday, September 22:

Be packed (see attached gear list for suggestions) and ready to go by 2pm, and meet at the Johnson Pond parking lot (behind Drummond) where the two vans will be. My cell # for any problems is 207-578-8036.

We'll leave as close to 2pm as we can. The drive to the trailhead is about 80 to 90 minutes. It is north of Kingfield along Route 27.

From the trailhead, we'll hike about 3 miles, gaining 600 feet in elevation. It should take about 1:30 hours. This is not a race, and we'll go in a traditional, orderly fashion, with a leader and someone assigned to be last to make sure no one is either ahead of others or behind. As long as we're at the Hut by 6pm, we'll be fine. Before we leave on the hike, I'll give you a task, something to think about as you walk.

At the Hut: The Maine Huts & Trails people request that you don't bring any electronics other than cellphones, especially because the Huts are off the grid, and charging devices is discouraged if not prohibited. For cellphones, they ask that you "power them down," by which they mean avoid using them, and don't let them buzz or beep.

We'll have one bunk room for the men, two for the women. And another for me. We'll need to take a few photos before it gets dark.

Dinner is at 6pm. After dinner, around 7pm, we'll meet in a separate room to discuss Nature Writing and a reading. I'll give the Nature Writing assignment then, but you may not get to it until the next morning. After this discussion, you're free, although obviously not to leave the Hut area.

The Hut people ask for quiet hours from 9:30pm on. Not absolute silence, just to be respectful of others and the place.

Saturday, 23rd:

Breakfast is at 7:30. After breakfast, we'll take about an hour or so for you to consider your assignment, perhaps do some notetaking, and even some drafting. Between 9 and 10, we'll head back down the trail by the same principle as on the way up. We should be back on campus by 12-1pm.

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT LIST
FOR MAINE HUTS & TRAILS TRIP
September 22-23

Sleeping bag

Backpack

Hiking/Walking Shoes + sandals at the Hut (you can't wear your trail shoes inside)

Journal and pencil/pen

Clothes appropriate for hiking. Consider that it will be 3:30 or so when we start, and the forecast for Carrabassett Valley – where we're starting from – is that it will be about 72 degrees and sunny.

Change of clothes at the Hut. The nighttime temperature will probably be in the high 40s.

By the time we hike out on Saturday, it might be around 60 degrees.

A fleece would be appropriate, a change of socks, perhaps long pants.

Hat?

Sleepwear.

Flashlight or Headlamp if you have one. We'll share, so not everyone needs to have one.

Toiletries – minimum.

Water bottle

Snack? I'll bring some snack bars.

Personal items you need, e.g., medicines, supplements.

Bug spray – I'll bring some and we can share

Sunscreen- although most of the hike will be under tree canopy.

NATURE WRITING ASSIGNMENT
Environmental Imagination
Fall 2017

Most nature writing is nonfiction prose, although it doesn't have to be in that genre, and is therefore usually a subset of Creative Nonfiction. You've seen several short examples of the form, from Thoreau's "Brute Neighbors" and "Ktaadn," to Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, to Mary Austin's "Land of Little Rain" (from *Land of Little Rain*). In each case, you've seen a different approach to writing about nature/environment/the non-human, with a slightly different set of views and feelings about that relationship. Writers sometimes are explicit in addressing their topics, some are implicit. You might try to remember when you've seen one of our writers do either. No writer does just one or the other (I think).

Your assignment, which is due October 4th in class, is to practice being a Nature Writer, based on your experience at the Stratton Brook Hut, although possibly including previous experiences. This is a "creative" exercise, definitely not an academic one, so feel free to experiment with your approach to the assignment. You should produce a minimum of two pages, and it can be as long as you want.

The goal, as it is with all Nature Writing, is to either represent the non-human by itself, or the relationship between human and non. If you think of our previous readings, you'll probably be able to identify places where a writer focuses most on the relations, and where the writer focuses mostly on the non-human.

Having taken notes at the Hut, and perhaps drafted an approach to the assignment, you can put it aside if you like until later. We're going to treat these as creative work in a workshop format, where everyone – or most everyone – will see everyone else's work and will have suggestions to make about the text in class. There will be no rough draft stage for this. The final product will count towards 10% towards your final grade. Later, I'll ask you to write one of the "reflection essays" identified in the syllabus, which will be another 5% of your final grade. The reflection is not due on October 4th.