

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

*Owls Head Revisited*  
By Jim Krosschell  
North Country Press

Review by Thomas Gagnon

### A Walking Meditation that Feeds the Mind and Soul

This is a little book, and it sends us on little journeys, not spectacular like, say, Homer's *Odyssey*. *Owls Head Revisited* is not, however, little of spirit. It is, undoubtedly, inspired by Thoreau's essay "Walking." For one thing, each chapter is a walk. But of course there is more to it than that.

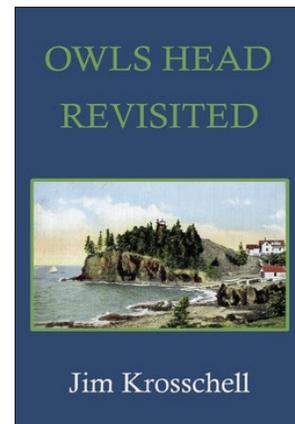
In "Walking," Thoreau makes his famous proclamation: "In Wilderness is the preservation of the world." He makes other proclamations, such as this: "For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer the holy land from the Infidels." The Infidels are those who confine themselves to shops and offices and (worse!) those who own private property. (These could all be the same people, but Thoreau doesn't say so.) *Owls Head Revisited* draws on all these concepts, especially wildness, preservation, and crusading.

A recurring theme in *Owls Head Revisited* is, certainly, trespass, and trespass does not exist without private property, which abounds—or is beginning to abound—in the small Maine town of Owls Head. Thus, when waterfront properties appear, already on p. 9, so does the trespassing problem. Krosschell continues to think at length about this issue of trespass:

*Yet this business of private property remains a sticky one. I feel slightly anxious walking on private roads. I don't know anyone here. There may be dogs. Surely not guns? The same issue arises if I'm walking on the actual shore, for in Maine ocean fronts are owned down to the low-tide mark. (10)*

Moreover, while Krosschell wants to be a wild and free Thoreauvian rover, he is, ultimately, a home-owner who has suffered the trespass of visitors. More often than not, he feels anxious about trespassing on private property. He speaks of the "anxious...feeling of not knowing where I am going, not knowing who might challenge me for my trespasses..." (27) He speaks of the "faintest frisson...of trespassing on someone else's wilderness..." (37) He prepares a defense of his transgression if he is challenged. One time, when he is avoiding a possible trespass, he is accosted from another direction by a loudly barking large black dog, and he flees.

Sometimes, Krosschell is an intentional, untroubled trespasser, as when he trespasses on the town's runway or when circumstances require him "to morph into trespasser." (16, 106) In both situations, a primary concern of the book comes through—escalating, unplanned develop-



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ment versus preservation of the natural environment. Thus, despite some restriction on the growth of the airport, the bigness and noisiness of it has diminished the habitat of native birds. (On p. 17, Krosschell's imagery, within parallel structure, makes a wonderfully evocative point about the airport's impact.) From the marsh, where he morphed into trespasser, Krosschell can see some of the neighboring town's industrial park, and he knows of "all the development on [local highway] Route 1—that modern swamp..." (109) Although the marsh is protected land, the "grotesqueries" of urban development are still perilously close. (Again, Krosschell wields language smartly. The word "grotesqueries" is both pointed and amusing.) These are, of course, not the only places that arouse in Krosschell a dread of development encroaching on Nature. New housing and commercial developments on Ingraham's Hill, on North Shore Drive and South Shore Drive, and in Owls Head Village all arouse this dread in him, a dread eloquently and persuasively expressed.

*Owls Head Revisited* is not, however, one long environmentalist rant. It is not, thankfully, a rant at all. It is a compilation of ten essays describing the author's ten walks in his summer hometown of Owls Head, Maine. On these walks with Jim Krosschell, the reader will encounter bunchberries and birch forests, puny developments and ostentatious mansions. He will also encounter a variety of issues apart from land conservation. One such issue, which opens the essay "North Shore Drive," is educational reform. (This issue leapt out at me, because my father was an educator.) Such reform apparently includes the vague credo that all students are to be trained for the global marketplace. This credo sounds vaguely positive, but Krosschell foresees a resulting class division, and "I mean the widening gulf between peoples in almost any human endeavor you can think of...a gap that I expect to see first-hand on my walk this weekend." (42) He also discusses the purpose (or not) of religion, the town's history from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and the attitude of Mainer. In sum, Krosschell goes on many engrossing detours.

As does Thoreau in his essay "Walking." That is certainly not the only similarity between Krosschell and Thoreau, but the really striking thing is the difference between them. Whereas Thoreau can be a pompous pontificator, Krosschell never is. On the contrary, he defuses his own judgments, as here: "From an outside standpoint, I'm just as guilty of excess as any resident of Freedom Drive. Just the basics of living in two places [Newton, MA and Owls Head, ME] make for embarrassment..." (38) Thoreau would not imagine this outside viewpoint examining him, nor would he feel embarrassment about his lifestyle. Krosschell chides himself, judges himself and his generation (Baby Boomers), and, often, expresses wariness of himself. He is a sympathetic person, not a preacher aloft. He also makes many specific observations of his environment, aside from a few digressions (whereas much of Thoreau's essay *is* a digression.) He shows us trees that "stand with open arms, massed together, lovely as sylphs" as well as an odd house called "Castle Comfort, complete with battlements and crenellations..." (45, 63)—and so on to his last essay. This is a thoroughgoing tour that welcomes us.

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Whatever Krosschell's relation to Thoreau (I'm guessing, modified hero worship), his book *Owls Head Revisited* is definitely grounded in the core Transcendentalist belief that God is manifest in Nature. Therefore, it is desirable to experience Nature as closely and directly as possible. Krosschell accomplishes this on his walks—and he hopes that we do, too.