

A novel about Vermont's granite industry

"Granite Kingdom: A Novel"

Eric Pope, Rootstock Publishing, 2022.

This impressively researched historical novel revolves around a major business rivalry in Granite Junction, a fictive village in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom at the time Vermont's granite industry was at its height. One of the rivals is Ernest Wheeler, an erstwhile farm boy who, admiring the heroes of Horatio Alger's novels, bought 163 acres of "worthless" granite-filled farmland and founded the successful Wheeler Granite Company. Unlike Alger's heroes, however, Wheeler overinvested and has been forced to sell the undeveloped part of his granite quarry to George Rutherford, a newcomer in the business.

Rutherford has married into a wealthy family; their capital and his own love for new machinery have quickly made his Sterling Granite Company profitable. As the novel opens in 1910, Rutherford has become the largest employer in Granite Junction; his business, like the social success of his ambitious wife, is celebrated weekly in the Granite Junction Gazette, which entirely neglects Wheeler and his family.

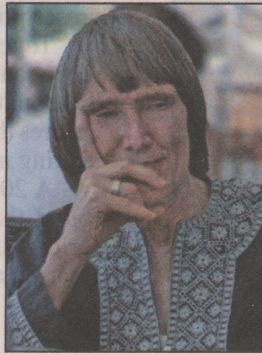
Caught between the two rivals is 20-year-old Dan Strickland, whose father's death has forced him to withdraw from the academy that educates the better-off students in town, and work for a living. Bright, resourceful, and ambitious, Dan has risen from a lad-of-all-work at the Gazette to a reporter; he hopes to rise further by marrying a girl who will give him status in the village.

Besides being a portrait of a rivalry, "Granite Kingdom" is a portrait of a town, its inhabitants, and its fears. For many people in the village—the Italians who work for Rutherford, or the women like Dan's mother and the beautiful Rosa Rosetti whose husbands have died from disease or accidents—the chief fear is exile to "the poor

farm" where indigent villagers live a miserable life. At a higher level, there is fear of gossip. In a village where the women's temperance movement bears considerable sway, many respectable villagers, like patrolman Powers or the up-and-coming young son of the town clerk, buy their liquor on the sly—not to mention other things to be had from the girls at the local laundry. But the biggest fear in town is sabotage, for there are several accidents at the quarries, and Burlington newspapers are filled with stories of violent strikes and terrifying destruction by Italian saboteurs. Rutherford, in whose quarry the fatal accidents occur, asks Dan to search the Italian community in town for possible culprits. But the only local violence Dan encounters comes from Wheeler's right-hand man, Bob Blackstone, and his two sidekicks, who dislike Dan's investigations of the accidents and bully him because the Gazette favors Rutherford, not Wheeler.

Behind this novel is Eric Pope's 10-year period as editor of *The Hardwick Gazette*, in Hardwick, once the center of Vermont's granite industry. Much of his research comes from historic copies of the paper, but also from intensive study of the equipment used in Hardwick's quarries.

Pope brings the 1910 granite industry to life with descriptions of railroad spurs to the quarries, derricks, and minute descriptions of the dangers of moving tons of rocks. He sympathetically portrays the dangers workers encounter, not just from accidents but from white lung disease (the result of breathing granite dust) and the damage from "bumpers," whose vibrations leave workers' hands numb for hours. In addition to its historical accuracy, the novel is filled with intricate portrayals of social ambitions and small-town competitions that give the wide-ranging plot the "feel" of American novels written in the early 20th century; the stylistic choice makes its portrait of the period doubly convincing.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

