

grate to the United States. Instead, he repeatedly revisits the conquest of 1848, which has undeniable resonance and relevance to the Chicano Southwest, but is far from the definitive event in twentieth-century relations between Mexico and the United States. Valdés illustrates that Mexicans in the United States have consistently fared worse than other Latinos. Given that the Mexican state has been in a much stronger position with regard to the United States than any other Caribbean or Central American country, his core/periphery analysis falls flat in explaining this phenomenon. Many neocolonial fields of interaction certainly characterize the relationship between the United States and Mexico; yet one cannot brush aside complex relations of domination and resistance within Mexico or other "histories from below" in the Americas. A faithful "history from below" is poorly served by nationalist rhetoric ironically drawn from southwestern Chicano paradigms that Valdés himself shows are not directly applicable to the midwestern experience. The meticulous analysis of the spatial and social relations of cultural and economic production constituting the bulk of the study serve Valdés and his historical subjects immeasurably better.

*Meredith Willson: The Unsinkable Music Man*, by John C. Skipper. Mason City: Savas Publishing Co., 2000. xv, 227 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewer John E. Miller is professor of history at South Dakota State University. The author of many books and articles on South Dakota and the Midwest, he is working on a book on famous "sons of the Midwest," including Meredith Willson.

This brief, fast-paced biography of the ebullient author of the popular Broadway musical, *The Music Man*, fills an important gap in the historical literature. Author John C. Skipper, a reporter for the *Mason City Globe Gazette*, indicates that he does not intend his book to be the definitive or all-inclusive account of Willson's life. With 68 well-chosen illustrations in a text of fewer than 200 pages (several appendixes list additional facts, awards, honors, books, and music), it can hardly answer in detail all of the questions we might have about this talented, ambitious, high-achieving, romantic, positive, generous, sentimental, and ultimately fascinating character. Willson did not leave behind a lot of letters, diaries, or other documents revealing his inner thoughts, but Skipper skillfully mines press clippings, magazine articles, and the few manuscript sources that are available in the Mason City Public Library, supplementing them with personal interviews, to tell the story of Willson's life.

Although Willson wrote three autobiographical volumes and a semiautobiographical novel that provide useful information, he avoided talking about two topics that readers would like to know more about. One was his sister Dixie's claim that she played a major role in the writing of *The Music Man*. It is hard to believe that a person widely acknowledged to be as considerate, open, straightforward, generous, and decent as Willson would have denied his older sister the recognition and financial reward that her contribution would have merited if she accurately described the role she played in the making of the musical. Skipper rejects the allegations, siding with local newspaper editor Earl Hall, who told Dixie that she was grossly mistaken in her accusations. Willson's reluctance to air this "dirty linen" in public paralleled a similar unwillingness to talk about the rift between his father and mother and his father's almost complete shunning of him—the youngest of three and an unwanted child—while he was growing up. Shortly after he graduated from high school, his parents went through bitter divorce proceedings. Skipper does not avoid these dark secrets in the Willson household, but the trail of evidence that might answer our questions about them ends almost before we even start.

The paradox of Meredith Willson's life is that someone growing up in the midst of such darkness and recriminations turned out to be, in the words of Mason City Mayor Kenneth Kew, "the personification of light . . . not darkness" and "a giver of joy . . . not despair." Skipper's biography competently describes Willson's rise from flutist in John Philip Sousa's band to musical director for NBC radio and television programs to Broadway playwright. More importantly, he describes a delightful man who truly loved life and people and was dearly loved in return. Most significantly, this is a book about a small-town boy who just couldn't get his home town out of his mind and about how the whole world came to know about Mason City, thanks to *The Music Man*.

*Saving the Heartland: Catholic Missionaries in Rural America*, by Jeffrey Marlett. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002. xi, 233 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Philip J. Nelson is a lecturer in history at the University of Northern Iowa. His research interests include twentieth-century American history and rural and communitarian studies.

Agrarianism is a popular and much-mined natural historical resource; in *Saving the Heartland*, Jeffrey Marlett revisits that mother lode of rural America by way of a secondary but significant vein—Catholic agrarianism. He tells the story of Catholic missionaries in the Midwest from

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