

and the views of Alexandre Hogue and the Farm Security Administration photographers. Hogue and the documentary photographers are usually seen as the most clear-eyed and honest recorders. Wood's paintings and New Deal murals are usually assessed as falsely self-congratulatory and idyllic, the embodiment of a "hollow heroism," to use Kinsey's term. While recognizing the failures, Kinsey also astutely shows that this brand of American Scene was not simply naive; rather, it was a complex, sophisticated phenomenon, often knowingly manipulated by the artists themselves. She describes that art as a paradox, and that may be the reason it has remained so meaningful to Americans whether they look at Hogue's work or at Wood's.

In the last section of the book, Kinsey faced not a paucity of visual material but an abundance. Postwar artists have documented, examined, and expressed the plains from every direction and angle, from Terry Evans's beautiful photographs of the roots of prairie grasses to Stan Herd's "earth portraits" that coalesce into recognizable images only when seen from an airplane. The discomfiture with the landscape has been replaced by a fascination with its openness, blankness, and history. Now we have our cultural memory of the Great Plains as the last major area to be settled, an area that remains a hostile environment at times with its floods, droughts, and economic edginess. Kinsey's selection of contemporary prairie pictures is compelling in its scope and variety, and it must be only a portion of the images the author reviewed.

This is a rich, closely written book, full of erudition and passion for the subject matter. Kinsey has organized a complicated issue into intelligible topics without losing the enduring, compelling scope of the landscape itself. The quality of the illustrations is good, and they are related usefully to the text. The notes and bibliography are a treasure for anyone who wishes to know more about any aspect of the prairies as well as for scholars who will find new resources and inspiration for their own work.

Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy, by Robert H. Wiebe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. x, 321 pp. Notes, index. \$25.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY HAROLD D. WOODMAN, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Robert Wiebe's new book is an investigation of the origins and evolution of American democracy, the nation's "most distinguishing characteristic and its most significant contribution to world history" (1).

It is also a jeremiad that laments the changes in the twentieth century that have undermined the vitality of democracy. The book concludes with a call for action to revitalize American democracy.

American democracy, Wiebe argues, was a combination of "popular self-government" and "individual self-determination" (9) that arose in the early nineteenth century when free white men simply assumed their independence and their right of self-determination. They destroyed the ruling hierarchies of the eighteenth century merely by ignoring them and creating in their stead a rough equality—at least among white men. In contrast to European countries, no "distinctive class of leaders" (65) or "rich patrons controlling a retinue of political retainers" (71) dominated American government; American white men ruled themselves. They achieved unity not because they never disagreed but rather because of their independence, their ability to resolve differences among themselves through the governing process, and their exclusion of outsiders—women, blacks, and Indians. Their government was local, small, and closely controlled by the white men in the neighborhood through regular elections.

The growth of modern capitalism brought increasing economic and political centralization, removing major decisions from the local scene and creating a new hierarchy in the form of "a three class system, . . . a national class, a local middle class, and a lower class" (115). The new national class, with its stress on rational control and decision making from the center by trained experts, undermined local self-rule and destroyed the independence of the lower class of workers, a process Wiebe calls in the title of chapter five the "sinking of the lower class." Conflicts between the remaining local middle class, whose influence steadily waned, and the increasingly powerful national class were avoided, at least for a time, by "one of the major political compromises in American history" (211): national leaders set general policies but left implementation (and the power that went with it) to local elites.

The trappings of democracy remained—and, indeed, seemed to expand. Suffrage was extended to women and guaranteed to blacks, and a whole range of new people's rights were invented, but they were rights that could be generated and protected only on a national level, that is, by the national government. This increased centralization and the power of the national class and further weakened the local elites, who found that national standards and national authorities determined and enforced not only political and economic policies, but also cultural and social policies that had always been the province of localities. The compromise that had sustained a degree of unity between the local and national elites dissolved.

The emphasis on rights guaranteed from the center undermined democracy rather than advancing it because it changed its meaning "from process to results" (215). People without the power to make real decisions in their localities simply became consumers not only of goods and services but also of ideas and policies, the extent and variety being provided by experts from the national class. Reaction came in the form of a revolt against liberalism, a growing resentment and suspicion of the center—of the national government, the media, higher education, and other institutions of the national class. The national class retained, indeed extended, its economic power, although it faced challenges on the cultural front. But these challenges did not weaken the new hierarchy or signal a return to self-rule because the national and local middle classes, even in the midst of their conflicts, agreed "in denying the lower class a voice" in the debates and thereby "short-circuited the democratic process" (246).

The only way to revitalize democracy, Wiebe concludes, is to reverse the centralization, destroy the ruling hierarchy, and return authority and power to local communities. Piecemeal reforms will not do the job. Rather, the people must reassert their authority by reasserting their self-rule in much the same way as they asserted their authority in the early nineteenth century.

This is a difficult, fascinating, and often brilliant book that breaks with the received notions of both liberals and conservatives and therefore will probably irritate both—which Wiebe probably intended. But it should provoke rethinking about the culture of American democracy—which Wiebe certainly intended. This book deserves to be read and pondered by serious students of American history and contemporary observers of the so-called culture wars.

Grinnell College in the Nineteenth Century: From Salvation to Service, by Joseph Frazier Wall. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997. xxii, 315 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM C. RINGENBERG, TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

What do you do when the beloved historian you had commissioned to write the sesquicentennial history of your institution suddenly dies with the project only partially completed? President George Drake of Grinnell College faced that unwelcome question in the fall of 1995, the year before the beginning of the college's grand celebration. For President Drake, the death of Joseph Wall not only presented an administrative problem (what to do with the incomplete manuscript) but also created a deep sense of personal loss. "For countless Grin-

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.