

Book Reviews

mental about what happens around him: "No matter where I looked, in the running walls that line the woodlands, in the folktales of the American Indians, or in the town records or verbal accounts of the area, I realized I was reading the obituary of my era. History sends out its message in any form you choose: we are the future of the past, and the past of the future" (200). Mitchell adds, "But I am learning to think in Nompenekit's Indian time, and I can tell you from my limited traveling in this area that the world around here, the world in most places on the American continent, is turned upside down. The spirits of the bear shamans have not yet been evicted" (71). *Ceremonial Time*, then, is more than just an engaging, spirited, local history. John Mitchell has given us that and much more; he has offered us a very personal but useful model for exploring, observing, and understanding not only where, but who we are.

INVERNESS, CALIFORNIA

DAVID WEITZMAN

Dubuque: Frontier River City, Thirty-five Historical Sketches, by Chandler C. Childs, edited by Robert F. Klein. Dubuque: Research Center for Dubuque Area History, Loras College Press, 1984. ix, 182 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$10.95 cloth.

As Americans spread westward across the continent, building new towns and cities, their emphasis naturally was all on the future. As the pioneer generation aged, however, a few among them always maintained a sense of history, and one or two felt the urge to set down the facts of early settlement, of the Indian culture that preceded the white pioneers, and of the young community's progress. Chandler C. Childs arrived in Dubuque in 1853, about twenty years after its initial settlement, to work for the *Daily Republican*, a short-lived local newspaper. Just four years after he arrived, in the summer and fall of 1857, Childs authored a series of sketches of Dubuque history for the paper. This was the beginning of a life-long avocation (Dubuque's city directories began listing him as "historian" in 1873). Childs saw the 1857 sketches as the basis for a more comprehensive history of his adopted community. Late in 1859 he deposited the sketches in the State Historical Society of Iowa for safekeeping along with a cover letter promising that "if time and circumstances permit" a full history would be forthcoming (161). But it was more than twenty years before the *History of Dubuque County* appeared under the imprint of the Western Printing Company of Chicago. This was, the editor's introduction explains, a "formula" local history, one of hundreds churned out in legion following the national centennial. Little of Childs's original prose survived the Chicago

editors, and his authorship was not even credited. So this collection of sketches, published for the first time together, represents Childs's unexpurgated pioneer history of Dubuque.

Editor Robert F. Klein, a librarian at Loras College and a founder of the Research Center for Dubuque Area History, has performed a valuable service, for this high-quality publication makes Childs's original sketches accessible to all those interested in Dubuque and Iowa history. Klein's carefully documented, explanatory footnotes work well to support the text by identifying individuals and events, elaborating on some points Childs left undeveloped, and occasionally correcting the author. The numerous citations in the notes and the bibliography should be welcomed by all students of Dubuque's past as a guide to contemporary scholarship on the community and region. Not the least of Klein's improvements on Childs's original efforts is the addition of a multitude of nicely reproduced engravings, maps, and photographs which visually document the emergence of the young frontier city described in the text.

Childs's sketches and Klein's notes provide a wealth of factual data that have unique value because Childs drew heavily on interviews with contemporaries and was himself eyewitness to many of the events described in later chapters. Childs's sketches are more than just an early example of what we now call "oral history," for he did extensive research in the town and court records, as well as in the early newspapers. Childs's factual accuracy, to which Klein testifies, places him a notch above most local histories of this genre, but his sketches also reflect some of the amusing foibles of this unmistakably amateur brand of history. There is, for example, a continual problem of organizing the events of the past into some understandable pattern—the essence of the historian's craft. The logic of historical narrative demands chronological sequence, to which Childs adhered relentlessly in a year-by-year chronicle of events. But his fidelity to chronology works against the need for topical coherence, usually to the loss of the latter. The result all too often is a string of events and names connected solely by the chance that they appeared simultaneously in the historical record. Thus within less than two pages (48–49) we are led through a list of disparate facts, including the precinct locations and election results from 1836, the population of Dubuque in that year, the chartering of the Miners' Bank, and the incorporation of the town. Throughout we also get the recitation of "firsts" that are ubiquitous in this style of local history: the first newspaper, church, town meeting, railroad, gas lights, and so on. Of course, it is unfair to judge Childs by the standards of modern scholarship. His purpose was not to analyze critically the meaning of past events but simply to set down the names and dates as a

Book Reviews

permanent record of the pioneer generation's achievements. We may also be sure that the commercial advantages of including a great number of family names in the narrative was well understood by the publishers of the *Daily Republican* when they first issued the sketches.

Childs's essays, in addition, offer an exquisite example of the marriage between local history and boosterism, which Klein notes on occasion when he must point out inflated population figures and other errors born of local pride. In Childs's hands the annals of Dubuque are the story of determined pioneers overcoming the physical adversities of the frontier and of lawless social disorder giving way to "the character of a well-regulated community" (50). In Dubuque the triumph of moral order did not seem so foreordained in the 1830s when the lead mines attracted a contentious, rough population of young males. Claim disputes were settled with guns, and a string of murders required vigilante justice in the form of "Judge Lynch" to substitute for what Childs referred to with certitude as "the law and order that a better civilization has since produced" (23). But as the town grew, Childs confidently recorded, "the moral power of the better class of citizens began to exhibit itself" (50). This was apparent not only in formal mechanisms of law and order but also in the growing presence of religious institutions, schools, and the proliferation of voluntary associations dedicated to such moral reforms as temperance and regulation of the Sabbath. Childs, a local civic booster, rock-boned Republican, and superintendent of schools, revealed a confident nineteenth-century Whiggish cast of mind that saw history as the progress of reform over evil, a process within the power of right-minded people to control for the betterment of the whole society. It is a view of the world that appears naive to the jaundiced modern eye, but it is in this capacity that Childs's sketches transcend their original purpose as a chronicle of local history to serve as fascinating historical documents in their own right.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

DON H. DOYLE

The Canadian Prairies: A History, by Gerald Friesen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. xv, 524 pp. Notes, illustrations, maps, bibliographical essay, index. \$24.95 cloth.

The people of the Canadian prairies (which, for purposes of scholarship, consist of the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) possess an unusually well-defined identity and self-consciousness that is based on a powerful sense of grievance. Prior to 1870 the prairies were part of the domain of the Hudson's Bay Com-

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.