

A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest, edited by Michael Martone. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press for the Iowa Humanities Board, 1988. 144 pp. Photographs by David Plowden. \$17.50 cloth, \$8.50 paper.

REVIEWED BY JAMES H. MADISON, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON

Other regions seem to have it all in the popular stereotyping: the South, with a literature and history rumbling with distinctiveness and the lost cause; the northeastern megalopolis, with its self-proclaimed cultural hegemony; the West Coast, with its celebration of sun-kissed hedonism. Left behind is the Midwest, bland and boring, right angle and square, a place of no place.

But times change. There is evidence in recent years of a modest, mostly unheralded revival of the Midwest as a place, a region set apart and deserving to be understood on its own terms. Most recently James Shortridge considers the region from a cultural geographer's perspective, while the dozen contributors to a volume titled *Heartland* seek commonality and distinctiveness in the histories of the region's states. Now comes a contribution from the writers.

From Michael J. Rosen's suburban Columbus, Ohio, to David Hamilton's small town situated quietly at the intersection of two U.S. highways, the eight contributors to this collection range across the Midwest of landscape, memory, and imagination. Editor Michael Martone writes that "Living here on the great flat plain teaches you a soft touch," for the Midwest is "a place of sense," (33), a place of subtlety that allows for feeling. Louise Erdrich argues eloquently for "a writer's sense of place," because "a writer must have a place . . . to love and be irritated with" (43). Douglas Bauer thinks about Iowa farm life with its emotional and spiritual rewards and constraints. Jane Straw and Mary Swander jointly consider the meaning of telling stories. Gary Comstock writes of a place of little sense rather than big sense, where there is time for localized memories and where people can "dwell in stories" (131). Janet Kauffman celebrates the virtues of vacant ground, of letting go instead of obsessively developing and forcing order on the landscape. All of these essays convey a sense of place, a feeling for an observed, remembered, and imagined Midwest. Most often it is the Midwest of farms and small towns, not of Gary steel mills, East St. Louis tenements, or Minneapolis office buildings. Photographer David Plowden contributes to the volume visual images of this small-town, rural Midwest.

In addition to a sense of place the essays also provide some sense of time, usually the present, but often also the past. It is personal time, the time marked and remembered through the lives of the writers'

fathers and mothers, grandparents and great-grandparents. Often it is time that is continuous as well as personal, time with little sense of change. The historian will ask more insistently about change, wanting to blend change with continuities. There is less of change, at least concretely or analytically considered, less for the historian to lift and footnote in the next article or book. But perhaps some of the discontents many feel about the state of history today stem from its inattention to a sense of place, its abstract quality that seems too often embarrassed to bother to locate the grand themes and theses in a particular and distinctive place. Certainly historians need occasionally to read essays like these, to experience ideas and personal sentiments that cannot be measured or easily capsulated, to remind ourselves that history is about time and place and how human beings live in both. Finally, it needs to be said that these essays simply make good reading, reason enough to recommend *A Place of Sense*.

An Account of Upper Louisiana, by Nicolas de Finiels, edited by Carl J. Ekberg and William E. Foley, translated by Carl J. Ekberg. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. ix, 153 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS AUGE, CENTER FOR DUBUQUE HISTORY, LORAS COLLEGE

In 1797 the Spanish government commissioned Nicolas de Finiels, a French engineer and cartographer, to improve St. Louis's defenses. After spending some time at this enterprise, Finiels moved to New Orleans, where he remained in the service of Spain. With the retrocession of Louisiana to the French, Finiels wrote *An Account of Upper Louisiana* to inform the French of the prospects and possibilities of this region. The information that Finiels provides is in part a product of his own experiences and observations. When these failed him, he had recourse to written sources as well as many conversations with residents of upper Louisiana.

The editors of this account suggest that a strain of Romanticism runs through the narration. Certainly there are passages to support such a view. For the most part, however, this engineer, true to his vocation, supplies us with the useful and the practical. The account is readable and interesting, although at times he overwhelms the reader with detail.

The title is misleading. Finiels devotes many pages to areas outside of Louisiana. The principal subject of the account is Illinois country, the middle portion of the Mississippi River valley. The eastern

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