

Naturalized Iowan

GEORGE MCJIMSEY

IN HIS BICENTENNIAL HISTORY OF IOWA, Joseph Frazier Wall draws attention to the state's "middleness." He notes that geographically Iowa lies between the nation's two great rivers and on the major routes of mid-continent transportation. Of the 50 states, Iowa ranks 25th in land area and, at the time he wrote, ranked 25th in population and 26th in personal income. In politics, its Republicans were "moderately liberal," its Democrats "moderately conservative."¹ This was the Iowa in which I grew up, the one that contributed to my work as a historian.

I am what you might call a "naturalized" Iowan. Although I never took classes to become a citizen of Iowa or pledged allegiance to the state, I embraced Iowa with the zeal of many an immigrant. Maybe this was because, like many an immigrant, I moved to Iowa when I was old enough from the start to appreciate it. It seems now that when I first arrived I sensed that my young life had taken a turn for the better. This sense, I grew up to believe, proved to be true.

I was born in Dallas, Texas, and spent most of my first eight years in Houston. But I never thought of myself as a Texan, de-

1. Joseph Frazier Wall, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1978), xvii-xviii.

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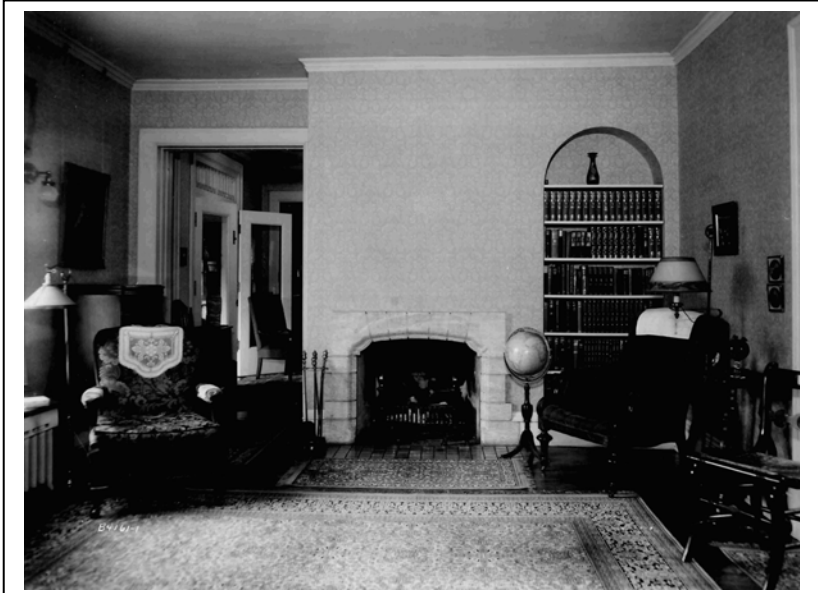


The author's family home at 605 Kellogg Avenue in Ames. In 1961 it was demolished to make way for an automobile repair shop. All photos courtesy of the author.

spite almost heroic efforts by my Texas relatives to keep me in the fold. My bookshelves contain some of their efforts—*Roadside Flowers of Texas*, *Great Rivers of Texas*, *The Raven*, *A Life of Sam Houston*, *Great Cities of Texas*—all Christmas or birthday gifts. I think I once received a gift subscription—some of my relatives being tenacious Texas liberals—to *The Texas Observer*.

But neither this nor the hours spent singing “Deep in the Heart of Texas” during family drives ever really made me a Texan. My mother probably had a lot to do with it. She had gone to Texas from Ames, Iowa, to teach home economics but had never adapted culturally. She once told me that when the spectators at a football game began to sing “The Eyes of Texas,” she turned to the person next to her and asked why everyone was singing “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Another time she told one of my father’s brothers that she might like to retire in the “northwest.” He replied that he had often thought of moving up to Amarillo. She thought that was a good one.

Thus, my regional identity began to form when, at age eight, we moved from Houston to Ames. During World War II, my father had worked at the Houston shipyard. In 1944 the government concluded that the war’s shipping needs could be



The authors' grandparents' living room, a place of comfort and culture.

constructed elsewhere, and we decided to move to Iowa. Ames had been my mother's hometown and we lived in a separate apartment in her parents' house. I vividly recall arriving from the train station and immediately feeling at home.

"Ames is a great place to raise kids" was repeated so often that it could have become the town's slogan. The slogan rang true in part because the community valued education. My parents supported the educational impulse. Family discussions identified people according to their educational achievements. My mother, who had a master of fine arts degree from Columbia and who taught costume design and clothing selection in the home economics division of Iowa State, once told me that her family was "education crazy" and had been attending colleges, from New England to Iowa, almost ever since there had been colleges to attend. Her parents were college graduates. My father, who had never gone to college, was also an education enthusiast. So everyone assumed I would go to college. Also, our home displayed the artifacts of college learning. My mother's parents were avid magazine subscribers; I specifically recall *The*

Saturday Evening Post, *Life*, *Look*, *Collier's*, and *Reader's Digest*. When my brother and I reached a suitable age, we were given a gift subscription to *Boys' Life*. Nor were my parents reluctant to give me a book as a Christmas present. During wartime, I read R. Sidney Bowen's War Adventure Series, in which RAF pilot Dave Dawson defeated the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific. We did not travel much, mostly trips to Des Moines, but whenever we went to a "big city" – Chicago or Washington, D.C. – my mother made sure we visited art galleries, where she explained the style and history of the paintings.

Ames also provided excellent schooling. Since Ames was the home of Iowa State College, its schools assumed that most students would attend college and prepared them for it. I took up with friends who were good students, had academic interests, and went on to scholarly and professional careers. Because Iowa State was a "technical school," Ames High's curriculum was especially strong in science and mathematics. History was taught by the basketball coach, with whom I got along fine because I played basketball but from whom I did not learn much history. I had some excellent English teachers, especially our teacher of world literature. She not only introduced me to important "Western" writers but also prepared me for college by giving essay examinations that required answers documented with "specific examples."

My father, a native Texan, inspired an interest in politics that directed me toward political history. The family story was that his father had decided that he should go into politics, had named him Joseph Bailey McJimsey after a popular East Texas politician, and taken him to political events. I recall sitting near the radio with him listening to the 1944 political conventions and later the election night returns, starting a family tradition that continued after he and my mother divorced and he had moved away.

I am sure I was attracted to biography because people figured prominently in family conversation. This was commonly not gossip but expressions of interest, as my mother liked to put it, in how to "figure out" others. We were less interested in what others did than who they were. Thus I grew up with a

kind of objective tolerance of other people and an interest in discovering what made them tick.

Although it never occurred to me at the time, I now realize that my religious upbringing was intellectually liberating. From the beginning we were theological "liberals." When we lived in Houston, we attended the Unitarian church, which must have been a kind of missionary outpost on that fundamentalist plain. When we moved to Ames, we joined the Congregational church, where theological rigor and conformity seemed less important than showing up for Sunday School, Pilgrim Fellowship, and the Christmas pageant. My mother once assured me that the creation story was "an allegory." Thus, I came to believe that I did not have to take seriously any part of the Bible that seemed to contradict common sense or anything I was taught in school.

I cannot overestimate the influence of my twin brother, Robert. At some time in grade school we became fast friends and fed each other's intellectual and academic interests. We made up games, discussed poetry and literature, and, most important, made up stories. We drew cartoon strips and wrote short stories that we shared with each other. In grade school Bob became a popular storyteller, making up tales of space travelers (this in the late 1940s).

These evidences of higher learning were diluted with hours spent reading comic books, listening to radio sportscasts, going to movies, palling around with friends, and attending canasta parties. Sports took up a lot of time. My brother and I started on the high school basketball team, which won many more games than it lost, and we spent hours honing our skills on the hoop attached to our garage.

Mix all these experiences together and you end up with a pretty well-rounded (a key catchphrase of the day) example of what the critic Dwight Macdonald labeled "midcult," a kind of limbo between the "high culture" of "serious" artists and intellectuals and "masscult," industrially manufactured drivel that culturally anesthetized the masses. Macdonald defined midcult as a corruption of "high culture." Its products' only claims to excellence were that they were better than masscult. They were acquired by those who aspired to better things but settled for

glossy formats and “liberalistic moralizing.” One of its icons was *Horizon* magazine, to which we were inaugural subscribers.²

All of this informed my idea of what it meant to be an Iowan. We were educated, tolerant, friendly, sporting, and intellectually curious but not snobbish. Of course, I had plenty of experiences to the contrary, but I thought of these as exceptions, cultural missteps or blunders that could be safely overlooked. We Iowans all floated on a sea of bland midcult happiness.

Sometime during our high school years Bob and I decided that we wanted to be teachers, a natural outcome of our family’s enthusiasm for education and our mother’s professorship at Iowa State. After this, my principal consideration was what kind of teacher I wanted to be. A position teaching high school and coaching basketball was my first goal. But each step up the education ladder heightened my ambition.

Bob and I had won scholarships to Grinnell College, where we enrolled in the fall of 1954. About 300 of the college’s 900 students came from Iowa; most of the others came from the Midwest. Grinnell encouraged social toleration. The college had been founded by New England missionaries and developed by abolitionist promoter-politician Josiah B. Grinnell. In the late nineteenth century it had become a center of Social Gospel Christianity. In a spirit of discouraging social distinctions, it disallowed fraternities and sororities, although the “halls” in its dormitory system did what they could to take their place.

I arrived on campus having no idea what to major in. When I was making up my first semester class schedule, one of my two roommates recommended that I take “Wall” for modern European history. “Wall” turned out to be Joseph Frazier Wall. Joe Wall was not as well known as he later became, both in Iowa and nationally. But he had become one of the most prominent faculty members on the Grinnell College campus. During my four years at Grinnell, the number of history majors rivaled if not surpassed those in other majors. That was largely because of Joe Wall’s teaching. Joe’s style was to give lectures that emphasized narrative and personality. It was because of his class that I decided to major in history.

2. Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York, 1962), part 1.

Another popular history teacher was Alan Jones. His approach was more analytical than narrative, and I did not so easily connect with it, although I later learned that it was more in keeping with the emerging use of social scientific “model building” in historical scholarship. His teaching prepared me to recognize that approach when I encountered it in graduate school. He directed my honors thesis, which I wrote on Jesse Macy, who helped to establish the discipline of political science while teaching at Grinnell from the 1870s to the 1910s. By the time I came to write the thesis, I had written a good number of term papers, but none longer than 25–30 pages.

Just as my high school world literature course had provided a fortunate preparation for college, so an English history course provided fortunate preparation for graduate school. Our supplementary text in the course was *Problems in English History*. Its chapters consisted of documents on a particular event, such as William the Conqueror’s claim to the English throne, followed by questions that showed how to evaluate the documents critically. Each Friday the class would take up a topic, usually going from student to student answering the questions. Occasionally we would write a paper on the topic. From that experience I began to learn how to write history from manuscript sources.

At Grinnell I acquired lots of practice writing and an appreciation for fine teaching. I also studied very hard. As I progressed through those years, I gave up wanting to be a high school basketball coach and decided I wanted to become a college professor. That meant I would have to go to graduate school. Since I was sure we could not afford it (I once thought Congress had passed a law that said my mother could never make more than the national average income), I figured I would have to get financial aid. So I studied hard to get good grades. I never thought of myself as a “grind,” but I guess I was. In the spring semester of my senior year, after a 9 a.m. ceremony at which I and some of my classmates, including my brother Bob, were recognized for making Phi Beta Kappa (the upper 10 percent of our class), we went to the student union for a little celebration. Years later I confessed to one of my classmates that I had been shocked to see students drinking coffee, dancing, and playing cards instead of studying. “You know, George,” she said, “I was

probably one of those drinking coffee, dancing, and playing cards. It was students like me who got you into Phi Beta Kappa." Studying hard earned me good grades and good recommendations from my professors. Those, combined, I am sure, with Grinnell's reputation, got me a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to the school of my choice. Joe Wall had gone to Columbia University, so I chose Columbia.

I now see that I should have learned more from Grinnell than I did. Its midwestern character and egalitarian traditions reinforced midcult assumptions that it was actually preaching against. In the fall of 1957 the college held a week-long symposium, "American Culture at Mid-Century." Distinguished scholars from around the nation gave presentations. Two of them, David Riesman and William H. Whyte, had become iconographic critics of mass culture. Riesman had written *The Lonely Crowd*, which argued that modern mass society had created the "other-directed man," who sacrificed personal growth in order to please others. Whyte's book *The Organization Man* examined how corporate values squeezed the individuality out of white-collar employees. We all understood their message and sneered at the poor souls they described. But I never got the idea that their analyses applied to me. An opportunity missed.

Columbia was a fortunate move. It gave me a chance to learn lessons that Grinnell had tried to teach me, but that I had resisted. Thus, it gave me the chance to develop as a scholar without permanently damaging myself in the eyes of the graduate students who later would become my friends and colleagues. Unlike my "small society" Iowa life, graduate work at Columbia was an experience in anonymity. I was one of more than 300 M.A. candidates, most of whom lived off campus and with whom I seldom socialized. I lived in a graduate dormitory, sharing a room with a very nice fellow who was preparing for the Foreign Service by taking courses in the Russian Institute. My thesis project gave me a chance to use manuscript sources at the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress and newspapers at Columbia's Butler Library. When I prepared the thesis, I had only classroom contact with my thesis adviser, followed by a few hours in his office while he copyedited my draft. The finished product, a study of the New York governorship of

Samuel J. Tilden, was an attempt at scholarship but far from the real thing.

Two other Columbia professors taught me the craft of scholarship. During my first semester I wrote a term paper for Professor William E. Leuchtenburg. Years later, I would introduce a graduate research seminar by reading his comments on the paper. They began with the words "excellent research," their last laudatory comment. The gist of what followed was that, in a writing style that was "generally syntactical," I had missed all the subject's important points: that is, the paper had no ideas. Grade: C+. The moral of the story, I would observe to my class, was that historians are made and not born. The more immediate lesson was that I had confused historical scholarship with the midcult values of bland narration and liberalistic moralizing.

Another Columbia professor, David Donald, showed me how to rise above my midcult values. His class in the Civil War and Reconstruction was the best class I ever took as a graduate student. The class met for three hours on Saturday morning. Each class period treated a particular topic. Everyone read James Ford Rhodes's classic account of the subject and another book from a list assigned for the topic. During the first hour, Donald would review the historiography of the subject. During the break that followed, students handed him a card containing their name and the title of the book they had read on the topic. During the second hour Donald would call upon these students to report briefly on their reading to construct the "current" interpretation of the topic. He would also ask questions that evoked a coherent discussion from a class of 50 students. During the third hour, he would venture onto the "frontiers" of the topic, posing new questions and hypothesizing about new ideas and themes that might emerge. David Donald's class taught me to think like a historian.

These were specific professional benefits of my year at Columbia, but I now realize that I benefited at a deeper level. My Iowa values and academic successes had gotten me to New York with too many easy assumptions about "truth" and "reality." Having grown up with tolerant, accepting people, I assumed that was how I should look at history. So my history tended to be superficial and critical only to the extent of my

tossing in a moralistic bromide here or there to show the people of the past how they might have done things just a little better. That was what Professor Leuchtenburg's criticism revealed, what Professor Donald showed me how to explore.

Of course, in 1958–59 I was about to join the rest of the country as we entered a major cultural transformation. Midcult satisfactions were giving way to anti-establishment suspicions. The "New Left" was germinating. And I was about to plant myself in one of its seedbeds.

I had enjoyed a year in New York, but the experience had convinced me that at heart I belonged in the Midwest. Most of all I missed the sense of open space: fields, lawns, sky. My Woodrow Wilson Fellowship ran out after one year, and Columbia did not provide much aid. When I was a senior at Grinnell I had applied to the University of Wisconsin, which had offered me a fellowship. So, encouraged by that and a meeting on job-seeking advice at which the speaker began by saying "I wish we could offer you a system like they have at Wisconsin," I applied there and was accepted without financial aid. (After college, my brother had obtained a scholarship from the Grinnell Rotary Club and had gone to the University of London to study English history. When I wrote to tell him that I was going to Wisconsin, he wrote back that he was going to Wisconsin, too. You may insert your own observation about twins here.)³

Wisconsin was just right for me. Madison was a beautiful city; the university's faculty and research facilities were top notch. Probably most important for me was the grad student camaraderie. In one sense, we rallied ourselves against the medieval torture scheme of the department's Ph.D. program. (I wrote qualifying examinations on the constitutional history of England and modern Germany, one day of the comprehensive exam for Ph.D. candidates in political science, and three days of comprehensive exams in U.S. history.) But we also encouraged each other to become scholars: to read, read, read and to look at

3. Bob received his Ph.D. in English history, taught briefly at Oberlin College and Ohio Wesleyan College, and then took a job at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. He has remained there, raising his family, and is now retired. We are still great friends but with different regional orientations. During a cross-country skiing excursion many years ago, he zipped along as I managed to fall down while standing still.



Harriet McJimsey strolls her twin sons (Robert, left, and George, right).

all the documents. Once, a colleague caught me using an index to a volume of the *Congressional Record*. "Start on page one, you lazy bastard," he ordered.

Wisconsin was one center of New Left culture. William A. Williams was in his heyday, publishing anti-imperialist scholarship and training a generation of Cold War revisionist scholars. The spirit of Charles Beard lived on in Merle Curti's sociological explanations of American intellectual history and Merrill Jensen's analyses of the political-economic controversies of colonial and revolutionary America. My major professor, Richard Current, said that when he arrived in Madison he felt safe to display a picture of Beard. Grad student ideologies spanned the leftwing gamut from Marxist to Socialist to Social Democrat. (I heard tales of a Maoist but never saw him.) Those ideologies

informed *Studies on the Left*, which became a major voice of New Left scholarship.

I read *Studies on the Left*, made friends with its contributors, and accepted with my midwestern, Iowa tolerance many of their revisionist ideas. But I never really became a believer. My midcult roots continued to tug at me; fundamentally I preferred consensus to conflict. I am sure that my leftist colleagues knew this, but they accepted me all the same. And we did have a lot of common enemies: racism, poverty, anti-intellectualism, and, perhaps highest on the list, the Ph.D. program. It would take some time for me to realize that midcult values could serve the purposes of reform.

I wound my way through the Wisconsin system and, while writing my dissertation, took a job at Portland State College in Oregon. Portland was a pretty, pleasant city; the department was welcoming and friendly, the students were wholesome and middle class. But it wasn't the Midwest; it wasn't Iowa. When my mother called to say that Iowa State University had an opening for an assistant professor of history, I applied and got the job. I would be at Iowa State for the next 37 years.

The most fortunate result of my return to Iowa was my marriage to Sandra Bryant. She had lived all her life in Iowa, principally in Indianola. She embodied all the positive Iowa traits I have previously described and added the invaluable one of civic virtue. Sandra believed, and still does, in good government, honestly and openly conducted for the benefit of the citizenry. She was president of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters (LWV) and a member of the league's state board. She served on various city planning task forces and as a member and chair of the Ames Planning and Zoning Commission and as a member of the county zoning authority. Conversations with her and in the company of her LWV friends, many of whom also served in local and state government, were seminars in good public policy and civic responsibility. I was proud to dedicate to her my first major publication, a biography of a man who exemplified her commitment to civic virtue: Harry Hopkins.

By the time I arrived at Iowa State I knew I wanted to write a biography of Harry Hopkins. I had read Robert E. Sherwood's book and thought of writing a more up-to-date and more read-

able version. Still, I thought it might be a formidable project, so I waited until I had tenure before starting on it. Hopkins had grown up in the Midwest, principally in Iowa, and had graduated from Grinnell College. When he was a public figure in Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, he frequently spoke about his humble origins and during an ill-starred presidential bid touted his Iowa roots. I was interested to see how much he remained an Iowan. Of course I found that he did and he didn't. He gladly left behind small-town society and cultivated a taste for life's finer comforts, whether or not he could afford them. He rejected his fundamentalist religious upbringing, although he kept to high ethical standards infused with a good measure of Protestant guilt. Still, it seemed to me that he developed and retained an essentially midwestern tolerance and friendliness that proved essential to his success as a government administrator. He had an almost uncanny ability to win people's trust and confidence and, where necessary, to encourage them to succeed. He was able to do this in part because he was willing to take responsibility for making difficult decisions and because he did not ask for special favors for himself or his family. In this respect he embodied Iowa civic virtue and Grinnell's Social Gospel Christianity. Others perceived this selflessness and responded to it. Thus, Hopkins was able to focus on tasks at hand and to shut out peripheral or self-interested distractions.

My interpretation of Hopkins contrasted with the prevailing view. Previous scholars, relying on Robert E. Sherwood, had emphasized the harder edges of his personality, portraying him as combative, goading, and sarcastic. They often related this to Hopkins's impatience with systems of authority and diplomatic niceties. What they failed to see was that you did not have to rip up organizational charts; you could leave them in place but build informal relationships to work around them. In this way Hopkins nicely complemented Franklin Roosevelt, who loved to tinker with organizations. But Roosevelt often wanted to strike political balances whose combinations could produce confusion, gridlock, and public name-calling instead of decisive action. Hopkins found how to get around that by bringing people together.

My interpretation of Hopkins might seem inevitably to link up with my interpretation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, the subject of my next book. I saw Roosevelt operating in a cultural context that emphasized social "balance," a fluid, open-ended social system in which "leadership" passed from one person to another depending on circumstances, in which leaders "facilitated" group decisions instead of determined them, and in which problem solving meant constantly dealing with the problems created by previous solutions. I called this cultural context "pluralism," the politics of which sought consensus through democratic means that opened political decision making to the largest possible number of persons and groups. It was a politics that emphasized tolerance, friendliness, self-restraint, and civic virtue—the qualities I had grown up with in midcult Iowa and the qualities I had highlighted in Harry Hopkins.

I will get to the truth of this shortly, after I point out that it is far too facile an interpretation. Both books reached similar conclusions but by very different intellectual courses. The Hopkins book was based on sources that my undergraduate education and graduate training had taught me to evaluate. It derived from dozens of letters written to Hopkins, describing his encouragement, good nature, courage, resourcefulness, honesty, and lack of pretense. Usually, but not always, these letters came from persons who had nothing to gain from flattering Hopkins. Very often they were reminiscences, shared with Hopkins by persons who had known him at an earlier time and had written to congratulate him on his public prominence. But even those who might have been currying his favor described traits similar to those ascribed to him by those who were not. Other key sources were notes and transcriptions of Hopkins's conversations and speeches, all of which evoked similar themes.

The Roosevelt book derived from an entirely different approach. It was based on reading in the social and scientific theory of the 1920s and '30s, illuminated for me in discussions with my Iowa State colleagues in the history of technology and science. Of course, history never perfectly matches theory, but Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency and Harry Hopkins's role in it matched the theory remarkably well. Roosevelt and Hopkins

employed pluralist values in pursuit of civic good, both at home and abroad.

Any historian who provides a cultural context for political actions and events is essentially treating those actions and events as chapters in a larger story. Pluralism began before Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency and continued after it. And that is where I came in: to the Iowa of the mid-1940s and 1950s, the culture of the midcult Midwest.

Sometime in the latter 1950s that culture began to fray and fracture. Iowans still honor midcult values. Their hospitality and friendliness are legendary, attested to each summer by thousands of RAGBRAI riders. Its educational values are intact. But economic stresses are challenging educational quality, and the state's politics have become essentially oppositional: the large, less populated areas solidly conservative Republican; the more heavily populated ones moderate-to-liberal Democratic. Worries to the point of hysteria about "illegal" (that is, Hispanic) immigrants challenge tolerance and inclusiveness.

It is not the historian's job to prescribe for the present, only to show how the past compares and contrasts with it. I did not write about Harry Hopkins and Franklin D. Roosevelt in order to recapture an idealized past: anyone who wanted to do that would not have written about the Great Depression and World War II. It just turned out that the life I led growing up in Iowa connected me to the culture of that time. Thinking about it now, I am glad it did.