

Book Reviews and Notices

Iowa — The Definitive Collection: Classic and Contemporary Readings by Iowans, about Iowans, edited by Zachary Michael Jack. North Liberty: Tall Corn Books, 2009. xi, 527 pp. \$26.95 paper.

Reviewer Tom Morain is director of government relations at Graceland University and the former administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa. He recently received the Harlan-Petersen Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa for distinguished service to the understanding of Iowa history.

Zachary Jack is in love. He is in love with the state of Iowa. And his kind of love is not just a comfortable attachment to his place but love “as one cherishes a beloved” (3). What else could have produced this eclectic compilation of writings, four years in the making, about the Hawkeye State from 93 Iowa authors? The table of contents alone is breathtaking — six pages of selections ranging from Black Hawk and the Iowa Constitution to contemporary poets laureate Ted Kooser and Mary Swander.

Jack calls home his family’s Heritage Farm in Cedar County and teaches writing, rural and urban history, and place studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. His affection for all things Iowa is of long standing. He explains that he was first smitten in fifth grade. While only ho-hum about sex education, he developed a consuming passion for Mrs. Bidlack’s tales of early days in Iowa. (I would love to know Mrs. Bidlack’s secret. Few of my Iowa history students at Iowa State University ranked those two subjects in that order.) However, like many others, he notes sadly that after a smattering of Iowa history in grade school he never again took a unit in any course devoted solely to either Iowa history or Iowa writers. “The lessons taught me about my homeplace, the place that had shaped me . . . turned out to be patently incomplete, or altogether absent” (3).

In large part to pursue his own smoldering interest in Iowa, Jack began reading and cataloging the writings of Iowans about Iowa. It started with a research project some 15 years ago on early agrarians such as Herbert Quick and Uncle Henry Wallace. In the process, he began to notice that many of Iowa’s notables left “compelling and resonant” accounts of how their Iowa roots shaped their accomplishments and philosophies. He cites the article by Herbert Hoover, “A Boyhood in Iowa,” as a prime example (e-mail from author to reviewer, May 29, 2009).

About four years ago he began to get serious about a formal collection of first-person accounts. "What information, I asked myself over and over, should an Iowan not be without? Who among our own must they hear from? These questions led me to include the best-known figures in this anthology, folks like Carrie Chapman Catt, Bob Feller, Susan Glaspell, Herbert Hoover, . . . Grant Wood and others" (5). Iowa lore supplied a second field of inquiry: "the Cherry Sisters, the Villisca Murders, the Honey Wars, the Spirit Lake Massacre, the Underground Railroad, John Brown in Iowa, the Civil War, Iowa prohibition, the Cow Wars, the Farm Crisis, the Iowa State Fair, the Little Brown Church in the Vale, and all the other Iowa fixtures fit to print" (5).

What qualifies one to be defined as an Iowa writer? To be or not to be an Iowan: that was Jack's question. For this collection, authors "had either to be born or raised in Iowa or devote their adult life to working in, and writing about, the home state" (6). Jack bemoans the dearth of "made it big" authors who did so while remaining in Iowa. In no small part this book is Jack's attempt to renew interest among Iowans in our own story, to get us to rediscover it and to sing it again in our own time and idiom.

Many of the selections are nonfiction, often autobiographical works looking back on childhood or early adult years. Tom Burke's "Student Life at Ames" and Helen B. Morris and Emeline B. Bartlett's "The Social Life of a Girl in Iowa College" provide useful glimpses of the social side of early higher education. Bob Feller's account of his early years in Van Meter sheds light on how the appeal of major league sports permeated farm and small-town life.

In his fiction selections, Jack resurrects the works of some Iowa authors respected in their own time but victims of changing tastes. The sentimental short stories of Helen Sherman Griffith and Calista Halsey Patchin provide detailed snapshots of Iowa small-town life in the early twentieth century. Susan Glaspell's brilliant "A Jury of Her Peers" was based on the sensational murder of farmer John Hossack, chopped to death with an axe while he slept in his own bed. His wife was convicted, but the verdict was later overturned. Regardless of where the truth lay in the real event, Glaspell, then working as a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*, deftly described through her imaginative fiction the world of an Iowa farm wife.

Jack has made a host of Iowa luminaries conveniently accessible. Like DNA from prehistoric ancestors, quotes drawn from *Iowa — The Definitive Collection* will likely begin to appear and reappear in Iowa histories and commentaries for decades to come. Perhaps in the near

future, the mark of a distinguished Iowa scholar will be his or her ability to cite an Iowa author not included in Jack's collection.

Nonetheless, can any anthology, even one with 93 selections, really be called "the definitive collection"? Jack's own working premise argues against it. Ignored for too long, our literary heritage is a mother lode of unknown gems that enriches readers willing to mine it. The impetus for the publication is to encourage others to explore, not to fence us in to a known corpus. It would be ironic (and tragic) if the book fulfilled the promise of its title and did indeed become "definitive." Should not this book encourage readers to re-explore old issues of *The Midland Magazine* or modern Iowa poetry journals or aging newspaper editorials to read with fresh eyes the observations of others, past and present, also trying to make sense of their encounters with the land and its people?

Asked if he had favorite selections in the collection, Jack replied that his favorites keep changing. "It's a continuous process of rediscovery in a book this large . . . like rediscovering lost change in the couch cushions!" (author e-mail). The analogy is a good one. The reader of *Iowa — The Definitive Collection* will also be richer for the effort.

Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion, by Walter Nugent. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. xvii, 387 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory, by Richard Kluger. New York: Vintage Books, 2007. xviii, 649 pp. Maps, appendix, bibliographical notes, index. \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer Kim M. Gruenwald is associate professor of history at Kent State University. She is the author of *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley, 1790–1850* (2002).

The events of the first decade of the twenty-first century have prompted American citizens to question their nation's place in the world. How do others characterize the United States and how should U.S. citizens characterize their home? What role has racism played? Walter Nugent and Richard Kluger have written books that explore the imperial underpinnings of American expansion and power. Nugent argues that the imperialism of the late nineteenth century had its roots in events that began a century before. Voicing a premise that applies to both books, he writes, "'Republic' and 'empire' have not always fit well together" (xiv). Both authors find it remarkable that it took the United States less than a century to acquire territory that spanned the conti-