

Others acted; Redpath wrote. Others dared their lives; he decried and deplored. Others uttered bugle blasts of eloquence; Redpath added notes to the chorus. Some readers may think that reason enough for honoring him. Others may note the ruined lives of southern African Americans who heeded Redpath and settled in Haiti. They may also draw a comparison between his career and that of the freedom fighter whose boldness he did so much to publicize. Like John Brown, Redpath came to hate slavery — so much so that he was prepared to fight it to the very last drop of the slaves' blood, and that of their masters, if he could only induce them to take up arms. Had he had his way, there would have been a thousand John Browns and four million Nat Turners. But Redpath would not have been among them. He was content to man the cheering section.

Cheerleaders, exhorters, hucksters — all deserve biographers; they should be so lucky as to find a McKivigan to do the job. But for many a reader closing this book, the question may be: Was this trip really necessary?

Westhope: Life as a Former Farm Boy, by Dean Hulse. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. xiv, 147 pp. \$19.95 cloth.

Reviewer Zachary Michael Jack calls home an Iowa farm and teaches writing, rural and urban history, and place studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. He has edited many collections, including *Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom* (2005); *Uncle Henry Wallace: Letters to Farm Families* (2008); and *Iowa — The Definitive Collection* (2009).

Memoirist Dean Hulse, the “farm boy” of the book’s subtitle who grew up on a North Dakota farm in the 1960s and 1970s, is someone midwestern readers will want to meet. He’s a straight shooter, careful to call out the fallibility of memory, and especially farm nostalgia, without condescension. More impressive still, this accessible, warm-hearted yet sober collection of essays can actually be read and enjoyed by the very ennobled small-town and rural folks who serve as its fodder and inspiration, unlike the many arch farm memoirs penned by literary types long since fled for the coasts.

Westhope — the title comes from the name of Hulse’s hometown, Westhope, North Dakota — is accessible, but it’s a double-edged sword, as the book suffers from a mile-wide, inch-deep syndrome that finds the author — a perceptive, laconic soul — leaving a subject before he has fully plumbed it. While this light touch facilitates an easy read, it robs the book of emotive power and depth, when, for example, Hulse tries to describe and concretize his own two-year stint as a young

North Dakota wheat farmer and his occasional middle-age depression and dispiritedness, an ever-present and too-little-explored motif. Likewise, the source, and force, of the book's greatest tension — Hulse's reasons for bittersweet parting from the family farm for Fargo — never get adequately treated. The reader senses that Hulse is in semi-dark, self-imposed exile but doesn't know why exactly. We know he farmed for two years in his youth with organic sympathies and suffered losses, but that very period, which might have been the roiling center of the book, suffers from amnesia. Symptomatic of the black-out are toss-off lines such as, "I farmed for only two years before quitting: A reason for my quitting . . . is this: I did not inherit Dad's optimism" (60). In and of themselves, these terse lines pack a punch, but they beg paragraphs to follow where the nut of them can be cracked open and held to light.

Most of all, though, this small book, fewer than 150 printed pages and a dozen chapters, struggles to find its center, as its author deploys a series of thin vignettes covering the stock stuff of rural memoir — cars and dates, moms and dads, pioneers and pariahs, births and deaths, neighbors and newcomers, small-town sinners and saints. The trouble is not that these subjects lack worth or originality; it's that Hulse's understated writing style fails to bring them alive and distinguish them from more lyrical yet still unflinching midwestern farm and small-town essayists, including folks like Carol Bly, John Hildebrand, Kathleen Norris, and Ted Kooser. Hulse flirts with the skills of these virtuosos only briefly in "Avon Calling," a deft essay detailing an ambivalent friendship between the author's ailing mother and the local Avon lady. Here, straight-up memoir is leavened with apt cultural criticism and literature review.

Perhaps Hulse's greatest appeal as an author seriously invested in reaching the literati who stayed home as well those who as left home is that he can't be pigeonholed, and his quiet work is the better for it. He's not an academic, though he's well read; he's not an ideologue, though he's occasionally indignant; he's not a "literary writer"; and he's not, in these pages at least, a schooled or hard-hitting journalist. Instead, Dean Hulse is a considered, circumspect voice looking back on his agrarian past from urban Fargo and wondering what the hell happened. Don't turn to *Westhope*, then, for answers or for language to make you sigh — or for anything in particular, for that matter. Turn to it instead for the same reason you turn on AM radio late at night — for the simple, soulful sound of a humane voice in an inhumane time.