

## Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

*Iowa: A History*, by Joseph Frazier Wall. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1978. pp. xviii, 212. Photographs, index. \$8.95.

As the Bicentennial tumult and shouting fades, we can see more readily that it was itself an historical event as well as a celebration of the nation's history. And since history is bound up in documents and narratives, it is fitting that the National Endowment for the Humanities funded, and the American Association for State and Local History administered, *The State and The Nation* series, a Bicentennial series of state histories. Fifty state volumes (plus one for the District of Columbia) ultimately will comprise the series. Each history includes a photographic "essay" that attempts to capture the state's contemporary flavor. Authors selected for the series had to have three important qualifications: a wide knowledge of the state's history, proven writing skill, and a strong personal attachment to their state. Joseph Frazier Wall serves Iowa well in the series with his *Iowa: A History*.

Professor Wall is a distinguished educator and historian, whose biography *Andrew Carnegie* was awarded the Bancroft Prize in 1971. He writes with ease, grace, and an obvious affection for his native state. The book reflects both his lifelong experience with Iowa and his training as an academic historian. Given the nearly impossible space limitation of some two hundred pages, Wall produced an interesting and useful summary of Iowa's founding, early development, and political and cultural roots.

It is a good book, well organized and consistent with its purpose of capturing the state's essence in a concise essay. The key to Wall's success is the vital theme around which he clusters the minutiae which too often cloud other historical studies. Wall sees the land itself as the primary force in Iowa's history. Drawing the theme from Robert Frost's poem "The Gift Outright," the book traces how this particular place was possessed by a people who in turn were themselves possessed by the land. This poetic vision captures the symbiosis between man and land reflected in the consistency and dominance of Iowa's geographic setting. Of course, one suspects that even as Wall penned his book, and we peruse it, some aspiring graduate student is grubbing away in a dusty library on a revisionist theory asserting that the land was not really all that important to the formation of Iowa's character as a state. But until that thesis is produced and defended, the land remains highly significant in the historian's view of Iowa, and this book is strengthened by it as a central theme.

A secondary theme, presented somewhat defensively, is the "middleness" of the state. From geography, through demography, to politics, Iowa claims the "middle ground." Wall shares with most Iowans some ambivalence about the moderation that characterizes the state. At times Iowans hanker for the clamor of the city or the hoopla of a California, but settle instead for a solid, well-defined middle position they hope represents a golden mean rather than a gray, uninspiring average.

When these themes are translated into illustrative chapters the book's quality becomes apparent. In short, deft sketches Wall introduces the traditional topics treated by Iowa historians. The Indians, early settlements, railroads, and the Civil War flow by in a smooth narrative that falters only occasionally. After the narrative account, Wall shifts to a topical approach, presenting farm development, the growth of cities and towns, twentieth-century politics and culture.

Several of the book's elements are worth special notice. The book is improved by the author's analytic approach to the subtleties behind commonplace events. The assertion that the small town businessman rather than the farmer has been the source of political conservatism within the state is an excellent example of analysis that would bear expansion in a more comprehensive study. Wall is critical of the simplistic habit of counting numbers of Civil War Iowans who were born in seceding states, rather than scrutinizing their political beliefs, in order to account for their dissatisfaction with the South. These beliefs, might well explain their migration away from slaveholding territory.

Such analysis saves the book from the greatest danger facing any commemorative work, that of offering a maudlin idealization of the commemorated institution. Wall astutely and fairly reports the state's blemishes as well as its achievements. Certainly the whites' treatment of the Indian was no better in Iowa than anywhere else. If these abuses have not attracted national and state attention, the book makes it amply clear that it was only because Indians did not play the dominant role here that they played in the Ohio River country, or on the Great Plains. Wall also shows that while we were strongly pro-Union and anti-slavery, our Civil War era attitudes toward blacks left much to be desired by modern standards. Finally, it seems that our vaunted literacy rate masks educational shortcomings yet to be remedied.

Perhaps the book's most appealing feature is its ability to stimulate the reader's interest in the state's history. Certainly every state can claim exciting events and interesting personalities, but Wall does an excellent job of demonstrating that Iowa also has a story worth telling.

The Coppoc brothers, who marched with John Brown, radical senator Smith Brookhart, Governor Cummins, and farm radical Milo Reno, are all fascinating personalities. Iowa politics also reveal a more varied past than most people realize. And of great interest are the several utopian communities that flourished here and there across the state. All these and many other specific events and personalities stimulate us to look deeper and read further.

Certainly, *Iowa: A History* tells few of our state's stories in their entirety. Elaboration in detail, careful analysis, additional research, and fuller interpretation are needed at a hundred places in our history. Wall's book whets our appetite to get on with the job. Academic historians and fiction writers could well share in the work. Many of the political movements and personality conflicts described in the book cry out for literary as well as historical interpretation. In fact, the book suggests that many authors writing about the state have gone astray whenever they have focused on nature as the antagonist in their stories. Instead, they might better have stressed the personal and institutional conflicts which have dominated Iowa's past. As the raw material of great literature, Iowa's essentially benevolent nature cannot hold a candle to political intrigue, farmers pushed to rebellion by depression, and Barclay Coppoc's anguished decision to replace his Quaker pacifism with violence in confronting the monstrous evil of slavery.

The book includes photographs, with especially fine portraits. Photographer Joe Munroe was handicapped by the editorial constraint that only contemporary photographs be used. A blending of current pictures with selected historic photographs would have caught more effectively Iowa's essence. In fact, it seems particularly strange that the editorial board opted for only contemporary photographs in what was to be, after all, a history book.

Another minor problem is the author's disproportionate concentration on Grinnell. We of course should write about what we know best, and Wall has spent years with the College and community of Grinnell, but there are places in the final chapters where one is tempted to retitile the book *How All Major Events in Iowa Happened in or around Grinnell*.

Despite these shortcomings, the book is an excellent short study of the state's history well worth anyone's time and attention. It is especially attractive for the intelligent layman who would like a solid grasp (short of becoming a full-time student) of the state's history. It is strongly recommended for personal purchase since it is handsome in format and high in quality, and one assumes all Iowa libraries and secondary schools will acquire *Iowa: A History*.

—Edgar V. Epperly  
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*Aspects of the American West: Three Essays*, by Joe B. Frantz. College Station: Texas A&M Press. 1976. pp. 82. \$5.00.

Anything written by the ebullient Joe Frantz merits serious attention, for it will be rooted in sound research, spiced with wit, and larded with penetrating analysis. Frantz, who does not always conceal his modesty under the proverbial barrel, is a firm friend of this reviewer, and, as W. Eugene Hollon points out in his foreward to the essays, only friends can trade good-natured

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