

# A HISTORY OF IOWA HISTORIES

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IT WOULD BE UNGENEROUS to say that historians follow the latest fad in the approach they take to writing history, but it is true, nevertheless, that historiography follows broad patterns. These patterns are as discernible in state and local histories as they are in the more prominent studies of regional and national history. State and local history's traditional relegation to the backwaters of historical profession, however, means that changes in the patterns appear somewhat later, though recent scholarly interest in local history as a respectable field of research may indicate that this is changing too.

At least three major subdivisions of this type can be seen in the writing of general histories of the state of Iowa. The first consists of histories written by gentleman historians in the nineteenth-century tradition, though their works were published well into the twentieth century. The second consists of work by historians or historical writers of the 1920s and 1930s who used a consciously popular style of writing to recapture the general audience that professionally trained historians were losing as they retreated into academe. The third subdivision represents the first efforts of professional historians to write scholarly histories of the state based on

the body of individual studies in Iowa history that had been published in historical journals and monographs for the previous seventy years.

THE ERA of the gentleman historian began in 1903 with the publication of Benjamin F. Gue's *History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*.<sup>1</sup> Gue had been born in New York in 1828 but he came to Scott County in 1852. In his career as a politician and a newspaperman, Gue became intimately acquainted with many of the conditions and events he would later describe in his general history of the state. In his years as a representative and later a senator in the Iowa General Assembly, he was one of the authors of the bill to establish a state agricultural college, and he became involved with the disposition of Iowa's federal swamp-land grant. Gue was elected lieutenant governor in 1865 and served one term. As a newspaperman, he served as the editor of the *Fort Dodge Republican* and its successor, the *Iowa North West*, from 1864 to 1872, and of the *Iowa Homestead and Western Farm Journal* in 1872 and again from 1880 to 1883. His exposure to historical work came in his position from 1892 to 1895 as an assistant to Charles Aldrich, the curator of the newly formed Historical Department of Iowa.<sup>2</sup>

Gue's intention in writing his history, which consisted of three historical volumes and one volume of biographical sketches, was to produce "a cyclopedia of general information pertaining to Iowa, that will render it indispensable as a work of reference to all." The reference function is dominant in a large share of the work. The second volume, for example, includes regimental histories of every Civil War infantry, cavalry, and artillery unit from Iowa, while the third volume

1. 4 vols. (New York, 1903.)

2. For biographical sketches of Gue, see: Johnson Brigham, *Iowa: Its History and Its Foremost Citizens* (Chicago, 1915), 1:397-408; Edward H. Stiles, *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa* (Des Moines, 1916), 592-595; and David C. Mott, "Benjamin F. Gue," *Annals of Iowa* 20 (April 1937): 603-631.

includes a one-page history of every one of Iowa's ninety-nine counties and a list of territorial and state officials who had served since the founding of Iowa Territory in 1838.<sup>3</sup>

Much of Gue's *History*, however, is more of a pioneer reminiscence than an encyclopedia. Instead of reminiscing about breaking prairie or grinding corn, Gue reminisces about the organization of the state agricultural college, the swamp-land speculations, the course of state prohibition legislation, the attempts to control the trusts and the railroads, and the rise and decline of the Granger movement. These are the events he experienced, and these are the events he describes.

Nor was Gue a believer in historical objectivity. As a Quaker and a staunch abolitionist in the antebellum years, Gue lauds John Brown and condemns the Southern traitors and their Copperhead cohorts in terms that suggest that the Civil War had not yet ended by 1903. His attitude toward the Indians of Iowa is that of the gracious victor. He devotes forty pages to the Spirit Lake Massacre (thus helping to establish its status as a classic tale in Iowa history), but he concludes sadly that the Indian seemed by 1903 to be incapable of being civilized and would soon become extinct.<sup>4</sup>

For his narrative, Gue adopts the style of his days as a newspaperman. He chronicles the history of the state in minute detail on the subjects he intends to cover, pauses to insert a brief editorial on, say, the nobility of the pioneers, then returns to the chronicle. His sense of proportion also seems to stem from his newspaper career. The third chapter in volume two, for example, is divided fairly equally between a discussion of the nomination and election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and an account of the Great Tornado that struck Camanche in the same year.<sup>5</sup>

Gue included a biographical volume with his history, following a practice that had been established by the county histories published in the 1870s and 1880s. Volumes like this are usually considered to be mugbooks designed solely to help

3. Gue, *History of Iowa*, 1:xxiii, 2:131-423, 3:291-531.

4. *Ibid.*, 1:63.

5. *Ibid.*, 2:35-45.

to finance publication costs and to promote the sales of the work to those who are included, but Gue maintained that he had consulted a number of authorities on Iowa, whom he lists, in determining the names to be included.<sup>6</sup> He may in fact have had more than a commercial motive in preparing the volume. In any case, *Gue's History of Iowa* is best seen today as a pioneer reminiscence on Iowa history by a political pioneer.

The second general history of Iowa, Johnson Brigham's *Iowa: Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*, published in 1915, was also written by a gentleman historian with a newspaper background. After studying for some time at Hamilton College and Cornell University in his native New York, Brigham began his newspaper work on the staff of several newspapers in the state. He then headed west to work on the *Fargo Daily Republican* in Dakota Territory, and finally in 1882, he became part owner of the *Cedar Rapids Republican*. Brigham sold his interest in the newspaper in 1892 and, after serving briefly as an American consul at Aix-la-Chapelle, he returned to Iowa to found a literary magazine called the *Midland Monthly* in Des Moines. Brigham had always been a somewhat literary newspaper editor, and he sought in this magazine to give Iowa's young literary figures, as well as its cultural and educational institutions, a much wider audience than they had received to that point. The *Midland Monthly* proved to be a literary but not a financial success, and it ceased publication shortly after Brigham sold it to a St. Louis syndicate in 1898. In May 1898 he was appointed stated librarian of Iowa, and he held this position until his death in 1936.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from his career that Johnson Brigham was one of the most serious gentleman scholars in Iowa in his time. He was a voracious reader, claiming late in life that he had

6. *Ibid.*, 4:xvii.

7. For biographical sketches of Brigham, see: Luella M. Wright, "Johnson Brigham," *Palimpsest* 33 (August 1952): 225-256; Forrest B. Spaulding, "Johnson Brigham," in Johnson Brigham, ed., *A Book of Iowa Authors by Iowa Authors* (Des Moines, 1930), 1-6; and "Johnson Brigham," in Brigham, *Iowa: Its History*, 3:1365-1366.

read more than 100,000 books.<sup>8</sup> With this background he might have been expected to produce a somewhat comprehensive general history of Iowa to replace Gue's reminiscences, but he did not. He chose instead to produce a reference work based on the Great Man approach to history.

In the preface to his first volume, Brigham states that the work was "written from the viewpoint of personality, — a history the aim of which is to show the extent to which great minds — minds possessed of vision, ambition, initiative, — developed a sparsely inhabited wilderness, with undreamt of resources and possibilities, into a great commonwealth set apart on the map as 'Iowa.'"<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps defensible to define a fairly limited span of history as the product of a Great Man (the Napoleonic Era, for example), but it is virtually impossible to describe the whole course of the history of a midwestern American state as the embodiment of a series of Great Men. Not enough great men — or great women, for that matter — arise in any culture to provide a sustainable sequence. Much of the time, history must muddle through with a succession of Pretty Good Men and So-So Men. As a result, Brigham is forced to fill in the gaps between the really significant figures in Iowa history with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of minor figures.

Social and economic history were beginning to become more prominent in historical writing by 1915, but Brigham had done most of his reading at a time when history meant political history, so he devotes most of his attention to Iowa political and governmental figures. His coverage of preterritorial Iowa includes the standard explorers and Indian chiefs, but as soon as politics came to Iowa, Brigham turns to a discussion of politicians and the state legislation they produced. Particularly in the period after the Civil War, his history is a chronicle of governors, their administrations, and the members of the Iowa General Assembly. One effect of this political approach is that the boundaries of the state tend to be coterminus with the city limits of Des Moines, with an

8. Des Moines *Evening Tribune*, 8 October 1936.

9. Brigham, *Iowa: Its History*, 1:3.

occasional tie-in to Washington, D.C., when Iowa politicians were prominent in national politics. Issues and personalities located away from the state capital appear for the most part only if they are involved in the actions of the governor or in state legislation.

Brigham does include some nonpolitical history even after the Civil War and, like Gue, he has his favorite topics. One of these is prohibition. As a newspaper editor, Brigham had always been a strong supporter of prohibition legislation. The vehemence of his editorials was so strong, in fact, that public reaction by the wet forces led him to keep a loaded revolver on his desk at the offices of the Cedar Rapids *Republican*.<sup>10</sup> With interests as strong as these, it is not surprising that he is careful in his history to chronicle the long succession of Iowa prohibition legislation in the nineteenth century.

For the modern student of Iowa history, Brigham's work is useful mainly as a biographical reference work. The two volumes of biographical sketches appended to the history are much like the standard mugbooks of the era. Following the tenets of his Great Man approach, Brigham also includes many biographical sketches in the text of the history itself. Most of these are fairly standard and many are only brief mentions. But some of the biographies (like those of Joseph Street and George Wallace Jones, for example) are substantial biographies that include anecdotes from the individual's life and quotations about him from letters, books, and newspapers.<sup>11</sup> These clearly show that Brigham did substantial research within the limits of his approach. The historical narrative itself, however, makes rather dull reading for anyone interested in the general history of the state, and specific topics are difficult to locate since the index is, appropriately enough, a name index. Rather than a true general Iowa history, Brigham's work is a substantial biographical dictionary.

Newspapermen seem to have a penchant for writing Iowa history. Like the first two general histories, the third — Cyrenus Cole's *History of the People of Iowa* — was by a longtime

10. Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, 9 October 1936.

11. Brigham, *Iowa: Its History*, 1:41-52, 179-185.

Iowa editor. Cole was born in the Dutch community of Pella on January 13, 1863, and he graduated from Central College in Pella in 1887. He immediately went to work as a reporter for the *Iowa State Register* in Des Moines and moved up to city editor in 1888 and associate editor in 1892. In 1898 he purchased a half-interest in the Cedar Rapids *Republican* and became its editor.<sup>12</sup>

Cole recognized the limitations of Gue's and Brigham's work for the general reader, and he sought to avoid them in his own work. "The author of the present volume," Cole noted in his introduction, "has undertaken to write a history in a form fitted for the general reader who is the average man and woman, and the average school boy and school girl . . . . While his work is complete as to time covered, it is not exhaustive." Recognizing the changes that had come about in Iowa life by the 1920s, Cole also noted that "All detailed writing has been avoided, for the author has not been able to make himself believe that men and women nowadays have either the time or the inclination for details." The result is a light, one-volume history divided into eighty-five brief chapters.<sup>13</sup>

Cole extends his topical coverage beyond the earlier writers to include some description of social, economic, and intellectual life, a refreshing change. He devotes about a fourth of the book to the period before 1833, with standard accounts of the exploration of what would become Iowa by the French, Spanish, British, and American explorers. In his discussion of Indian removal, Cole adopts a Social Darwinist position. He concludes that if possession of the land meant use of the land, then the Indians were not dispossessed of very much, and the processes of Indian removal employed by the whites "do not seem very unjust or cruel, if so at all." In a textbook expression of Social Darwinism, Cole dismisses the white hatred of the Indians with the statement that "They

12. Cyrenus Cole, *A History of the People of Iowa* (Cedar Rapids, 1921). For biographical information on Cole, see: *Des Moines Register*, 15 November 1939; and *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 16 November 1939.

13. Cole, *History of the People of Iowa*, vii-viii.

were living under the laws of the jungle. It was kill or be killed. It was still merely the survival of the fittest."<sup>14</sup>

Cole's discussion of the antebellum years in Iowa includes much more on the daily life of nonpoliticians than had the earlier historians. Cole was of Dutch ancestry, but he tends to credit most of what was valuable in the newly forming Iowa culture to its Yankee stock. He was responsible for reinforcing, if not originating, the Iowa folk myth that the state's earliest settlers in the 1830s were southerners who, he wrote, "made livings in easy ways, and they were much addicted to hunting and trapping and fishing." The southerners were supposedly supplanted in the 1850s by a flood of immigration by the "hard working and thrifty classes" of New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the northern areas of the Trans-Allegheny West. By the Civil War, Cole concludes, Iowa had become "like a transplanted east with a New England aspect." Generations of students in Iowa history classes diligently learned this sequence, but it has been sharply questioned by more recent historians.<sup>15</sup>

Cole continues his lightly analytical treatment in the remainder of his work, though he is not as enchanted with the subject after he leaves the pioneer period. Born too late to have participated in the Civil War himself, Cole is more balanced in his treatment of the opposing sides than Gue or Brigham, and he considers the period from 1865 to 1885 to be, frankly, quite dull. Lacking his predecessors' fascination with the political maneuvering of the times, Cole notes almost apologetically that "The times were ordinary and the men were not extraordinary."<sup>16</sup> He does perk up, however, when he moves on to the years between 1885 and 1896, the years when he was a statehouse reporter for the *Iowa State Register*. Having experienced the politics and politicians directly, he concludes that the events occurring in the state were so largely political just at this time that "other matters appear of little importance or interest."<sup>17</sup> While he was no doubt sincere in

14. *Ibid.*, 51, 82.

15. *Ibid.*, 286-287.

16. *Ibid.*, 392.



this, his statement demonstrates one of the major weaknesses of the gentleman historians who had been writing Iowa histories: their histories were very much personal histories, following the twisting paths of their amateur interests and personal experiences and making little if any attempt to resist the pull of their own biases. For the period after 1897, when Cole was a Cedar Rapids editor and therefore away from the bustle of Des Moines politics, he dashes through the years on the premise that, for recent history, a "running account will suffice."<sup>18</sup>

Although his style of writing was lighter than that of his predecessors, Cole's statements are also better documented. His work is not a fully documented monograph by any means, but he does frequently provide specific sources for his quotations and for points disputed among historians. Cole made the mistake, however, of adding a chapter at the end dedicated to his mother in which he declares that much that he has included is based on stories she told him as a child. No doubt that would be true of many of his accounts of pioneer life, but it seems unlikely that he learned the history of the swamp-land speculations at his mother's knee. Cole was college-educated and an avid reader of Iowa history, and his narrative reflects this, but this final chapter has caused him to be too easily dismissed as a teller of pioneer stories.<sup>19</sup> His work is not yet scholarly history, but it is more substantial than that.

In 1931, a decade after Cole's single-volume history of Iowa, a new multi-volume history was published: Edgar R. Harlan's *Narrative History of the People of Iowa*.<sup>20</sup> This five-volume history (made up of two historical and three biographical volumes) was another product of essentially an interested amateur, though Harlan did hold a position as curator of the State Historical Department. His professional training was in law. He was born in 1869, grew up in Van

17. *Ibid.*, 447.

18. *Ibid.*, 511.

19. See, for example, Fred A. Shannon's review of Edgar R. Harlan's *A Narrative History of the People of Iowa*, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 20 (June 1933): 120.

20. 5 vols. (Chicago and New York, 1931).

Buren County, and graduated from the Drake University law school in 1896. Then he returned to Keosauqua to practice law. In the meantime, however, he also began to assist his father-in-law, George C. Duffield, in the preparation of his reminiscences for publication in the *Annals of Iowa*. This brought him to the attention of Charles Aldrich, who asked him to come to Des Moines as his assistant. After Aldrich's death in 1908, Harlan continued briefly as an assistant curator while Benjamin Shambaugh, superintendent and editor of the State Historical Society, was appointed curator. Harlan became curator himself in 1909 and continued in the position until 1937, when a short-lived period of Democratic control of the statehouse brought about his replacement. He died in 1941. Throughout his nearly thirty years as curator, Harlan was mainly an historical administrator rather than a writer. The *Narrative History* was his only major work.<sup>21</sup>

Harlan's legal background is strongly reflected in his writing. He makes extensive use of long quotations from his sources, though his documentation for the quotations is quite brief and, for a lawyer, very ambiguous. In his discussion of the preterritorial period, for example, he relies heavily on the standard works, but cites them simply as "Paxson" and "Thwaites." Considering the widespread use of full documentation by professional historians by 1930 and a lawyer's usual precision in citing his sources, this ambiguity is surprising. Harlan may have simply been trying not to discourage any interest a general audience might have in his history, but the ponderous style he uses in the sections interspersed between quotations would have discouraged the average reader anyway.

Once he comes to the period when Iowa had a government to examine, Harlan turns almost completely to the kind of political history that the historical profession was certainly

21. For biographical information on Harlan, see: Des Moines Register, 14 July 1941; Ora Williams, "Edgar R. Harlan," *Annals of Iowa* 23 (October 1941): 150-152; "Edgar R. Harlan," *Annals of Iowa* 23 (October 1941): 156-157; and Ora Williams, "The Iowa Historical Department," *Annals of Iowa* 23 (April 1942): 277-280.

outgrowing by the late 1920s when Harlan was writing. Particularly after the Civil War, Harlan's *Narrative History* is simply a succession of chapters on gubernatorial administrations, with each chapter containing a biographical sketch of the governor, a restatement of his inaugural message, an account of the acts of the Iowa General Assembly, and a brief discussion of the major political issues in the state at the time. As with the other Iowa histories that embodied this approach, the actors and events in the Des Moines political scene are seen in sharp clarity, but the state beyond the city limits is seen as through a fog, dimly.

The biographical volumes published as part of Harlan's state history are very much in the tradition of subscription mugbooks. They may very well have provided the main reason for publishing the work.

THE SECOND ERA of publication in Iowa history was that of the consciously popular history. As mentioned earlier, a movement arose in the 1920s to recapture the popular audience that works of history had had in the nineteenth century before increasing professionalism had led academic historians to produce histories that had little claim to being literature and that assumed a fairly substantial knowledge of the topic being discussed in detail in the monograph. In other words, historians were increasingly writing for other historians. Working against this trend in the 1920s were writers like Hendrik Van Loon, Will Durant, and H.G. Wells. Their goal was to distill the products of academic historians, translate their conclusions into readily understood statements, and present them in a light, nonscholarly manner.<sup>22</sup>

The State Historical Society of Iowa, which had a substantial publishing program at this time, was one of the institutions that pursued this approach. Under the direction of Benjamin Shambaugh, the society turned from its con-

22. This movement is discussed in detail in James Steel Smith, "The Day of the Popularizers: The 1920's," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 62 (Spring 1963): 297-309.

centration on publishing detailed scholarly works in Iowa history to popular history of the type still found in *The Palimpsest*. A monograph that reflected the new approach was Irving B. Richman's *Ioway to Iowa*, published in 1931. Richman's work had all the trappings of popular history, but it could not be considered a general history of the state because its coverage only extended to the 1870s and included little beyond the 1850s.<sup>23</sup> But Shambaugh was still preoccupied with popular history in the mid-1930s when he began planning a massive series called the Centennial History of Iowa. Cole's *Iowa Through the Years*, published in 1940, was intended to be the introductory volume in the series.<sup>24</sup>

W.R. Boyd, a colleague of Cole's in his days at the Cedar Rapids *Republican*, recalled after Cole's death that he "was a very 'ready writer' . . . If there was little that was suggestive in the day's news, Cyrenus was not perplexed. He could sit down at his typewriter and pound out a grist of 'airy nothings' which were as easy to read as they were for him to write."<sup>25</sup> When Shambaugh selected him to write the introductory volume for the new series in a popular style, Cole's ability to produce airy nothings was given free rein. The product was a one-volume history of the state in a collection of 108 chapters, each one little more than a vignette of Iowa history.

Politics, Cole's forte, was the only subject treated in any detail; economic and social history can be found only in an anecdotal form. This is especially true, as always, for the post-Civil War period, where at one point Cole makes the revealing observation that "While waiting for the next elections, it may be worthwhile to take note of what the people of Iowa were doing during those years."<sup>26</sup> Cole's characterizations of Iowa political figures have some of the appeal of an insider's viewpoint, especially for the years when he was a statehouse reporter for the *Iowa State Register*. But a modern student of Iowa history should not forget that these portraits reflect

23. Irving B. Richman, *Ioway to Iowa: The Genesis of a Corn and Bible Commonwealth* (Iowa City, 1931).

24. Cyrenus Cole, *Iowa Through the Years* (Iowa City, 1940).

25. Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, 16 November 1939.

26. Cole, *Iowa Through the Years*, 381.

Cole's own biases. This is especially true of his coverage of the period after World War I. Cole was elected to the United States House of Representatives in a special election in 1921, and he served until his district was reorganized in 1932, when he decided not to seek re-election. Cole's history becomes increasingly rancorous in these years. By the time he reaches the New Deal, his statements are strongly affected by his personal condition, so they cannot in any way be considered a reliable, objective description of the period.

A second example of the popular approach to Iowa history can be found in William J. Petersen's *The Story of Iowa: The Progress of an American State*, published in 1952.<sup>27</sup> The two volumes of history it includes were apparently written mainly as an adjunct to the two biographical volumes that accompany them. Publication was preceded by a major sales campaign for the biographical sketches and subscriptions to the four-volume set. The result is a two-volume history of the state that is not particularly valuable.

The stress placed on the commercial aspects of *The Story of Iowa* is unfortunate because it was the first general history of Iowa to have been written by a professional historian with strong graduate training in history and a long publishing career. Petersen received a bachelor's degree from the University of Dubuque in 1926, a master's degree from the State University of Iowa in 1927, and a doctoral degree from the same institution in 1930. His specialty is in the history of steamboating, and the book published from his doctoral dissertation remains the standard work on upper Mississippi steamboating. He had been employed at the State Historical Society of Iowa since receiving his degree in 1930, and since 1947 he had been its superintendent. There was, therefore, an opportunity for the creation of a serious, comprehensive general history of Iowa at this time, but the potential was not realized.<sup>28</sup>

The classification of *The Story of Iowa* as part of the

27. 4 vols. (New York, 1952).

28. *Directory of American Scholars*, 6th ed., vol. 1: *History*, ed. Jacques Cattell Press (New York and London, 1974), 490.

era of popular history derives from the fact that it was based largely on articles in *The Palimpsest*. But, while many of the *Palimpsest* articles were written by authors who adopted a light, popular style in their writing, the text in *The Story of Iowa* is flat and bland. The intention seems to be to get from one end of the history to the other as easily as possible. Most of the first volume of the two historical volumes is presented in essentially a chronological order, covering the period up to the Civil War, but the remainder of the first volume and all of the second are devoted to a series of topical chapters on such subjects as steamboating, medicine, and education. Because of this, the reader can trace the sequence of Iowa history only through the Civil War; after 1865 the reader must follow the state's history haphazardly through the various topical chapters. The chapters are divided into titled subsections, but the titles are often deceiving. One subsection labeled "Southern Sympathizers in Iowa," for example, devotes only the first sentence to this topic, describing an incident at Burlington in which a crowd cheered when they heard that abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy had been killed by a mob in Illinois. The remainder of the subsection briefly describes John C. Calhoun's opposition to Iowa's becoming a state, the Case of Ralph, and the 1840 presidential election (in which it is noted that three Iowa counties are named after Webster, Clay, and Calhoun).<sup>29</sup> Each chapter in *The Story of Iowa* contains a bibliographical note at the end, and the modern reader would do better to go directly to the sources listed in these notes than to read the information as it is distilled in this two-volume history of the state.

WITH THE PUBLICATION of Leland Sage's *A History of Iowa* in 1974 the study of Iowa history finally benefited from a professional historian's analytical abilities and background in the sources and his intention of writing a well documented, serious, and somewhat comprehensive general history of the state.<sup>30</sup> Sage certainly has the professional background to write

29. Petersen, *Story of Iowa*, 1:411-412.

30. Ames, 1974.

such a history. He received a bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University in 1922, and master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Illinois in 1928 and 1932 respectively. Although his original experience was in European history, Sage developed an interest in Iowa history in his years as a professor at the University of Northern Iowa from 1932 to 1967.<sup>31</sup> His main interest within Iowa history is in its political history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and he published a scholarly biography of William Boyd Allison in 1956 that was very well received by academic reviewers.<sup>32</sup> The dominance of the gentleman historian in Iowa historical studies was clearly over.

Sage declares in his preface that his work is intended for "intelligent readers of all ages," and it is certainly true that it is not written in the intentionally airy style of the popular history approach.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that it is a particularly dull book, just that it is a serious one. In it, Sage presents a succession of chapters in a strictly chronological division, with a preliminary chapter by Herman L. Nelson on Iowa's geology, geography, and prehistoric period. This chronological coverage largely ceases in about 1938, with only one chapter devoted to the period after this date. The book lacks a bibliography, but it is well documented, and many suggestions for more detailed reading can be found in the notes.

As Iowa histories have traditionally been, Sage's book is built around political history. Its strongest chapters are on the political developments from the Civil War to the Progressive Era, reflecting Sage's scholarly concentration in this area. Sage does recognize the work's political emphasis, but he contends that his discussions of politics are discussions of economic and social politics, so that some knowledge of social and economic history can be gained from them.<sup>34</sup> It is also true, as reviewers have noted, that the journal and mono-

31. *Directory of American Scholars*, 546.

32. See reviews by Elmer Ellis, in the *American Historical Review* 58 (October 1957): 149-150; and by Jeannette P. Nichols, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (June 1957): 159-161.

33. Sage, *History of Iowa*, ix.

34. *Ibid.*, xi.

graphic sources in Iowa history on which a general history can be based have concentrated on Iowa politics and government.<sup>35</sup> But much of the social and economic history of a state, not to mention its intellectual and cultural history, is not played out in the political arena. So, much of the state's nonpolitical history remains to be written, as the author acknowledges in proposing that his *History of Iowa* should only be considered one step in an extended program of publications in Iowa history that would include several scholarly one-volume histories of the state, a biographical dictionary, and finally a definitive multi-volume history.<sup>36</sup>

Even with its recognized limitations, Sage's history is a very valuable work. Sage is well grounded in the studies that have appeared in journals and monographs over the previous decades, and he periodically pauses in the chronological narration for a well reasoned and balanced analysis of a number of classic disputes in Iowa historiography. He concludes that the Spirit Lake Massacre, for example, which claimed substantial sections in earlier Iowa histories, was only a minor incident in the overall relations between whites and Indians in Iowa.<sup>37</sup> He also lacks the booster spirit that led so many earlier Iowa historians to see little that could possibly be criticized in the state's history. He dismisses Iowa's pride in its religious toleration on the basis of Governor Lucas' invitation to the Mormons to settle in Iowa as an "arrogant claim." Lucas' invitation, Sage concludes, was quite guarded and was in fact later used by Isaac Galland in his land fraud schemes.<sup>38</sup> Sage is not a dedicated debunker, but he is judicious.

Joseph Frazier Wall, an Iowa native and a professor of history at Grinnell College, continued the scholarly trend in the writing of general histories of Iowa with his 1978 book,

35. See, for example, reviews by: Allan G. Bogue, in the *Indiana Magazine of History* 71 (June 1975): 193-195; Gilbert C. Fite, in the *Journal of American History* 64 (September 1977): 453-455; and Trudy Huskamp Peterson, in the *American Archivist* 37 (October 1974): 596-598.

36. Sage, *History of Iowa*, xi.

37. *Ibid.*, 107-108.

38. *Ibid.*, 73-74.



*Iowa: A Bicentennial History*.<sup>39</sup> Not a fully documented monograph, Wall's book offers an interpretation of Iowa history in the form of an extended essay designed to fit into the States and the Nation Series sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The series was intended to present, according to its general editor, James Morton Smith, "a summing up – interpretive, sensitive, thoughtful, individual, even personal" of what a particular scholar considers to be significant about the history of the state.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, the historians were instructed to capture the tone of a state's history, and to Wall this can be found in Iowans' relationship to the land. Using Robert Frost's poem "The Gift Outright" as the basis for his chapter headings, Wall ties various activities to the land, as in "We Bring Our Ideals to the Land," and "We Politick for the Land." When he uses the term, however, he seems to mean the land as a geographic unit, not the land as soil. In specific cases, Wall sometimes strains to seize a reluctant metaphor, but he does not really try to tie everything in Iowa history to the land. When the relationship becomes forced, he drops the idea except in its most general definition as a synonym for "the state of Iowa."

As a result, Wall's essay on Iowa history is a much more balanced treatment, within the two-hundred-page limitations of the series, than any of the general Iowa histories that preceded it. Politics plays a role but does not dominate the course of Iowa history. Industry and the cities outside Des Moines finally receive some attention, as do social structure and intellectual life. Like Sage, Wall deflates some of the myths of Iowa history, including the idea (popularized by Cyrenus Cole) that in the 1850s Iowa became virtually an extension of New England.<sup>41</sup> The essay format does not allow for the kind of factual detail found in Sage's *History*

39. New York, 1978.

40. Wall, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History*, xi.

41. *Ibid.*, 50-53.

of Iowa, but Wall brings a scholar's analytical approach to his discussion, and he makes some pronouncements that make even the nonscholar stop to think. Is it really true, as Wall proposes, that "no other event . . . was to have so profound an impact upon the state as the Civil War"?<sup>42</sup> Maybe yes and maybe no, but it is certainly something to think about. Wall has an engaging style and, for the reader with only a modest background in the subject, his book is a good place to look first for an introduction to Iowa history.

In progressing through the three eras of the gentleman historian, the popularizer, and the scholar, Iowa has accumulated a number of general histories of itself, each written with a different purpose and from a different perspective, and each has a different value for the modern student of Iowa history. For reminiscences of a pioneer politician and newspaperman, there is Benjamin F. Gue's *History of Iowa*. For those with a real passion for political history, there is Edgar R. Harlan's *Narrative History of the People of Iowa*. Cyrenus Cole's *History of the People of Iowa and Iowa Through the Years* provide similar accounts by another gentleman historian, with the latter work written in a somewhat more popular style. For biographical information, Johnson Brigham's *Iowa: Its History and Its Foremost Citizens* embodies a biographical approach in its narrative history, and of course Brigham, Gue, Harlan, and Petersen all included volumes of biographical sketches with their histories. As an introduction to the study of Iowa history, one might well begin with Joseph Wall's extended essay, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History* and continue with Leland Sage's *History of Iowa* for more substantial treatment. The notes accompanying Sage's text and the bibliographical notes with the chapters in William J. Petersen's *Story of Iowa* offer some initial bibliographical suggestions to pursue individual topics in greater detail.

42. *Ibid.*, 107.

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