

Book Notices

A Judge and a Rope, and Other Stories of Bygone Iowa, by George Mills. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994. xi, 187 pp. Illustrations. \$14.95 paper.

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George Mills, a veteran reporter for the *Des Moines Register* and an experienced observer of Iowa politics, offers readers a new collection of anecdotes and tales from the state's past in his latest book, *A Judge and a Rope, and Other Stories of Bygone Iowa*. The short articles in the collection recount anecdotes (sometimes amusing and sometimes disturbing) and brief biographical sketches of famous and not-so-famous Iowans from the early statehood period to the 1960s, from frontier weddings and Civil War battlefields to river town speak-easies and state institutions. An essay on Henry A. Wallace is especially interesting. At the heart of the collection (and what gives this work its greatest interest) are several pieces on Iowa during the Great Depression, with highly descriptive accounts of how economic and social crisis led to moments of bitter protest and even, on several occasions, to organized armed violence. The title of the book, for example, comes from a chapter recounting a 1933 attack by northwest Iowa farmers on District Judge Charles C. Bradley in which the irate mob literally dragged the judge off his bench and threatened to hang him.

Many of these colorful accounts suggest underlying conflicts over racial discrimination, gender roles, cultural values, class and economic interests, political style, and the proper role of political power, but Mills's focus is always on the individuals who were involved. He avoids much theorizing about the larger implications of these issues by sticking to a highly anecdotal, sometimes nostalgic, narrative, similar to the approach he has taken in his earlier works. As a good storyteller, Mills attempts to recreate in the contemporary imagination the lived experience of earlier times. This sort of approach is familiar and certainly popular. Although *A Judge and a Rope* lacks the scholarly tone and comprehensive scope that one finds in a work such as Leland Sage's excellent 1974 survey, *A History of Iowa*, it does offer an accessible and entertaining perspective for the reader interested in Iowa's past.

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