

Book News

Julie McDonald

We Have All Gone Away, by Curtis Harnack. New York: Doubleday, 1973. pp. 188. \$6.95.

TO ONE BORN ON AN IOWA FARM more than four decades ago, Curtis Harnack's minutely remembered and expressively recorded memoir, *We Have All Gone Away*, offers one shock of recognition after another.

However, a Kurdish tribesman would enjoy the book if he could read English, so universal are its verities.

The "we" of the title refers to all of us—even those who still live in Iowa. We have gone away from the experience of the Depression years, and Harnack gives it back to us, not with sentimental nostalgia, but with the honest and beautiful telling of how it was.

From his earliest years in Plymouth County, Curtis Harnack was a person upon whom nothing was lost. The content of *We Have All Gone Away* reveals the genesis of an earlier book, *Love and Be Silent*, a novel movingly filled with Iowa truth.

After a first reading, I noted the points in this latest book of Harnack's where my own experience entangled itself with his. In at least fourteen instances, he might have walked into my head and carried out what he found there; then shaped it with his own fine style.

The thrill of being up and permissibly noisy at an unnaturally early hour to begin a trip to a lake—the lake country smell of water in the air—the sense of the lake as "an element equal to the land and maybe mightier, since it could pull you under and drown you." What land-locked Iowa farm kid hasn't registered these sensations?

Harnack, the grandson of a master barn-builder, sees barns as centers of animal life, convenient passion pits for humans, imaginary

schooners for small boys, shelters from the weather, and timepieces that gauge the hour by the length of shadow under the eaves. He writes,

Those barns were alive because we were; and what was left of Grandfather was hand-hewn beams and whittled oak pegs that bore testimony to his intentions. When he'd viewed miles of tall prairie grass straight to the horizon, enclosing him in a perfect but terrifying circle, he began to build out and up from the bull's-eye of that circle. I caught his aspiration and faith, but who of us could fulfill what he thought he'd only begun?

How well we know, for many of us have barns of memory.

Harnack's country school teacher, Miss Flock, whose forte was reading "The Bobbsey Twins" aloud and playing pinochle with her pupils, must have been more fun than the average young girl who "baby-sat" big boys nearly her own age in so many one-room schoolhouses in Iowa. One applauds the conspiracy to keep her pedagogic deficiencies a secret from parents.

The dead father whose memorial was a stuffed pelican inexplicably shot from a barn roof in Iowa gave his son a mystery that transcends my own souvenir from a departed sire—an owl bagged in the henhouse and subject to questionable taxidermy.

Many of us remember farmhouses with a wealth of porches, upstairs bedrooms with sloping ceilings, and more inside doors than any human being could need or want. Harnack writes, "We committed so much of ourselves to the rooms of the house while we lived there that a presence seemed to cling long after all of us had gone . . . rooms held onto existence longer than people did and chambered the inmost reaches of memory."

The impulse to be out and away into a larger world comes at an early age. Harnack found it in the rush of water through the drainage tiles of the farm's eighty acres of wild land. In spirit, he traveled with that water on its way to the Gulf of Mexico, and he writes,

The throaty gurgle of the tiles only a few feet below the surface was the music of journey, of the long voyage to the sea; I felt opened by it, freed . . . we were being nourished here for such travelings, storing up all that might be needed, and, like the water in the tiles, we'd never be back.

As for nourishing, I hadn't thought of burnt sugar cake since I ate my last piece several decades ago on an Iowa farm. I yearned for it again reading Harnack's account of the collation his aunt and mother prepared for the thrashers' meeting.

The book's power lies in Harnack's ability to see and convey the deep, human meaning in the external events of Iowa farm life: his Uncle Jack solving daily farm problems with brute strength and his educated mother taking the safe way—"somewhat passive, with intellectual justifications for everything." Ironically, Carrie Harnack chose the ultimate violence while the uncle "peacefully kept on building his life."

Carrie, who was schooled out of easy companionship, deprived herself of the friends her children might have been to her by helping them to go away. Lonely and longing to go away too, she bought the one-way ticket of the suicide, and even that did not take her far. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage in a psychiatric ward.

So many Carrie's have lain awake in the dark bedrooms of farmhouses scheming for their children's futures, fierce in their determination that the life of the mind shall prevail. Mercifully, they don't know the cost until the order is delivered. If they did, it wouldn't change anything.

Closeness in the immediate family and a wealth of more than 200 relations at a family reunion were not unusual in the 1930s. How arcadian to be able to say, "We celebrated the very gift of life, honored our ancestors, and paid homage to the extraordinary fact that we existed on earth simultaneously, in this moment of time, with fibers of the same chromosomes threading our beings."

We have all gone away, and like Harnack's Uncle John, we can't come back and find things as we remember them. We can, however, look at our past and decide what to reclaim, what to discard, and where our "away" should be. Failing this, we should change our motto from "Iowa, a Place to Grow" to "Iowa, a Place to Germinate."

Curtis Harnack's book can help us in such an undertaking. It could have been a sentimental "sunshine on the silo" memoir, but it isn't, because he has confronted his ghosts (and ours) squarely.

#

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.