

Hamlin Garland: A Life, by Keith Newlin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xii, 490 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Thomas K. Dean is special assistant to the president for communications and research and teaches interdisciplinary courses at the University of Iowa. He is a longstanding student of midwestern literature.

In describing Hamlin Garland writing one of the final volumes of his autobiography late in life, Keith Newlin says, "Garland had fallen victim to the pitfall facing every biographer: allowing chronology, and not the story, to dominate" (348). Newlin's monumental and seminal biography of the "dean of American letters" is structured chronologically, but he has heeded his own caveat. What emerges from the wealth of clearly presented detail is the story of a complex man, a writer and thinker of enormous influence in American letters and culture across two centuries.

The story is a narrative of conflict, more internal than external, as Garland sought to create a new kind of native literature, yet found himself conflicted about his own goals and abilities. Living a life that touched nine different decades, Garland saw his influence and reputation wax and wane, yet generated a body of writing that ranged across subjects as diverse as midwestern pioneer life, political radicalism, drama, literary and artistic theory, western mining life, the state of the American Indian, psychic phenomena, and Ulysses S. Grant. As Garland pursued these many literary paths, he also founded numerous cultural organizations (some of which, such as the American Academy of Arts and Letters, still hold great influence), served on the early Pulitzer Prize committees, and became one of the United States' most sought-after lecturers. Amidst this tapestry of interest and experience, Newlin reveals a man who, at the same time, was highly egotistical, persistently insecure, obsessed with his reputation and influence, dedicated to artistic principles, desirous of being a best-selling author, and simultaneously trapped by and loyal to his family. It is a fascinating story, overall well told.

For the historian of Iowa, the early chapters will be of greatest interest. Newlin details the Garland family's pioneer life in the Midwest, including a number of years in Iowa, instigated by his father before Garland was born. The elder Garland, like so many others, had "a bad case of land fever [and] drifted ever westward in search of better opportunities, each time seeking to augment his landholdings but finding betrayal in the land or its crops" (7). Garland is known for his writings about the harshness of life on the midwestern frontier, the harshness of nature as well as the unfairness of society's exploiters. The biography, therefore, provides an excellent firsthand look at land speculators and

exploitive landlords, as well as the social and political movements that fought against them as Garland grew older and became politically involved with advocacy for the single tax. In the midst of all this, we see how frontier stresses were not conducive to a comfortable or happy family life.

Garland's interests were more artistic than political, though. In addition to his literary depictions of "boy life on the prairie" and the antagonistic forces at work against rural midwesterners in stories of literary naturalism, Garland was himself a literary theorist advocating what he called "veritism." The truthfulness of art (literary and otherwise) was to come not from European or East Coast models, but from the realities and authenticity of the local land and the life of its people. Scholars of Iowa will thus be also interested in Garland's yeoman attempts at sparking a specifically midwestern literature. The Midwest (and particularly Chicago) never quite became the new literary center that Garland had envisioned. Garland himself was drawn to the cultural vibrancy of the East Coast and ended up spending much of his time and literary capital there. At the same time, he never gave up his presence in Chicago until much later in life when he moved to California to be with his daughter and her family. We thus see the burgeoning literary culture as it developed in the middle lands into the twentieth century.

Although Newlin keeps Garland's story at the forefront, the entirety of the monumental detail in the biography's 400-plus pages likely will attract only the most ardent of literary historians. Garland's own peripatetic life (which included European jaunts, Klondike adventures, and a dedicated love for the American Southwest), let alone his voluminous output of writings on disparate subjects and in a variety of genres, can obscure the image of Garland as a "midwestern writer." A close reading of the early chapters and a judicious selection of the remainder of the book, however, will reward the Iowa scholar with a strong portrayal of midwestern history, literary regionalism, and artistic influence from the "middle border" from 1860 to between the world wars.

The Plowman Sings: The Essential Fiction, Poetry, and Drama of America's Forgotten Regionalist Jay G. Sigmund, edited by Zachary Michael Jack. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008. ix, 119 pp. Index. \$22.00 paper.

Reviewer Mike Chasar is assistant professor of English at Willamette University. His research and writing have focused on American literature, 1880–1945.