

Much of the reform he advocated had a moral foundation to it. An ordained Presbyterian minister who gave up the pulpit for health reasons but continued to preach an occasional sermon throughout his life, Wallace expended much effort suggesting ways to make remaining on the farm attractive to the sons and daughters of farmers. He also sought to reduce the drudgery of farm life for women by urging farmers to bring labor-saving devices into the home. Uncle Henry advised farmers to be just as careful "not to overwork the mother of your children" as they are "not to overwork your horses" (176).

The contradiction in Wallace's career is that the changes he advocated were part of a process that made farmers more productive, thereby reducing the number of them needed to feed the nation. While he had hoped to increase the farm population and create "a rural civilization distinct from urban ways" (203), Wallace helped set in motion a chain of events that have helped depopulate rural and small-town America in the years since his death. Kirkendall understands this process very well and doubts that Uncle Henry would be completely satisfied with the way things have turned out. Surely, however, he would be pleased to know that much of what he advocated in time became the conventional wisdom. And he would be happy to know that America still has the most productive farmers and the most well-fed people in the world.

The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing, by Ronald Weber. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992. xi, 252 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

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The ascendancy of the Midwest in American literature coincided with the economic development of the region. Its major phase spans the time from approximately 1910, with the Chicago renaissance and the emergence of *Poetry* magazine and the *Little Review*, to about 1934, when the Great Depression and a spirit of international modernism began to take over.

The first difficulty in describing midwestern literature is determining what the term means, what authors should be included, and what criteria should be used regarding subject matter. If the Midwest encompasses the high plains of western Nebraska as well as the slum streets of Detroit and Chicago, is it a region at all or merely a geographical space? By contrast, southern literature appears to have easily identifiable characteristics, and regional identity can be verified with less difficulty.

Ronald Weber, the author of this well-written, balanced, and extraordinarily sure-footed account, has chosen wisely to focus primarily on subject matter: how the region and its people are revealed in an author's writings. He rightly decides that Mark Twain cannot really be claimed as a midwestern writer, and that Hemingway and Fitzgerald, though midwesterners by birth, looked elsewhere for the most part in their literary interests. After addressing the salient issues about regionalism and the Midwest, Weber proceeds to discuss authors, ranging from Howe and Garland through the major figures — Dreiser, Anderson, Cather, Lewis, and Rolvaag — with less important but significant writers such as Masters, Suckow, and Sandburg given their due. He also analyzes the "garden myth" about the rural midwestern experience, as well as the love/hate relationship so many midwestern writers display toward the region. "With the passing of the pioneering period a splendid story was over," he writes, "lost somewhere back among the dark fields of the republic, and with its passing sounded the elegiac note that forms the often distant and faintly recognized background of much of Midwestern writing" (22).

This book is refreshingly free of literary theory and fashionable academic lingo. Weber has a sound grasp of the milieu out of which midwestern literature arose, has read widely in biography and criticism pertaining to these writers, and has a deep knowledge of the history of the period and the literary climate of the time. Furthermore, one senses his compelling interest in the subject and how much the accomplishments of the Midwest's best writers mean to him. A novelist and short story writer himself, Weber brings to the reader's attention what writers thought of each other, in terms of the region, as well as the usual literary critic's report. For instance, Fitzgerald, in a 1925 letter to his editor, mocked writers who were telling tales of farmers, trying for a "Feel of the Soil" (205). Sinclair Lewis's generosity toward other writers, even someone so different as Willa Cather, sheds an interesting light on his flamboyant personality. Weber uses these comments sparingly, and they always serve a purpose. In this age of "pathobiography," in Joyce Carol Oates's term, it is refreshing to find a literary critic delving into personal details of authors' lives only when it produces some information necessary for understanding their literary achievement. To read Weber's dignified, perceptive account is to realize what a sensationalized period we are now in with regard to literary biography, and how frivolously self-indulgent so much literary criticism of the day really is.

Weber's assessments are carefully laid out and very convincing, although I think he overdoes the importance of Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. He concludes that only Cather, whose work included six major books and many significant lesser ones, fully realized the

promise of the midwestern ascendancy in American literature. Although Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* remains a seminal work not only for the midwestern literary scene but for American literature as a whole, his other novels were not such major achievements. Hamlin Garland did not seem to understand what his talent was, *Main-Traveled Roads* being a fluke in some ways. Sherwood Anderson got too windy later on, but *Winesburg, Ohio* and his best short stories are a permanent part of the nation's literature. Too often, pursuit of popular appeal and a desire for financial gain spoils the artistic integrity of a writer's talent.

Unfortunately, Weber underrates the considerable achievement of Ruth Suckow, perhaps because she is strongest in the short story form, which is often thought to be on a lower scale of accomplishment than the novel. He does use Suckow's comments on regionalism very tellingly, and her observations are particularly useful in a book on this very subject. Of the other Iowa literary figures discussed, I was particularly struck by his examination of Floyd Dell's *Moon-calf*, the influence of John Frederick's *Midland* magazine, and the breezy analysis of Carl Van Vechten's *The Tattooed Countess*. Phil Stong's *State Fair* has to be mentioned, more for historical reasons than literary; the ways in which Hollywood images influence perception of the midwestern landscape and people is revealed tellingly in the case of Stong.

Glenway Wescott claimed (in *Goodbye Wisconsin*), "The Middle West is nowhere; an abstract nowhere. However earnestly writers proud of being natives of it may endeavor to give it form and character, it remains out of focus, amorphous, and a mystery. . . . There is no Middle West. It is a certain climate, a certain landscape; and beyond that, a state of mind of people born where they do not like to live" (204). Ronald Weber has shown us, to the contrary, what a fascinating region it is, as revealed through its best writers.

Weber ends with a look at Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, with their rich evocation of Michigan's northern woods landscape ("The Last Good Country," according to the title of one of Hemingway's late, unfinished stories, but a country so changed that in "Fathers and Sons" the older Nick Adams finds the towns' continuity from one generation to another is lost). "With the end of the twenties and the early work of Hemingway, perhaps the most gifted and influential writer of all from out of the Midwest, the fragile sense of likeness that had sustained serious Midwestern writing was gone" (221). Weber's recreation of that era is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the contribution of midwestern writers.

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