

*Uncle Henry: A Documentary Profile of the First Henry Wallace*, by Richard S. Kirkendall. Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Life. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993. xvi, 259 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD BROADIE, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

"Uncle Henry" Wallace—minister, farmer, founder of *Wallaces' Farmer* magazine, adviser to presidents, conservationist, and progressive—is the subject of Richard Kirkendall's informative and lively new biography. While generally less well known than his son, Henry C. Wallace, and grandson, Henry A. Wallace, Uncle Henry's contributions were nevertheless substantial. His influence on farmers at the turn of the twentieth century, mostly as a speaker and a journalist, helped bring about what Kirkendall calls the "Great American Agricultural Revolution," the time when "both technological and demographic developments substituted technology for people in farming at a rapid pace, made corporations and government more important in the lives of those who remained on the land, and made American agriculture enormously productive" (7).

Richard S. Kirkendall began his study of the life of the first Henry Wallace while working on a biography of Henry A. Wallace, secretary of agriculture and vice-president to Franklin Roosevelt. Convinced that Uncle Henry had a profound influence on his grandson and was important in his own right, Kirkendall put together what he calls a "documentary profile" of his life. Much of the text is gleaned from articles written by and about Henry Wallace during and after his long career as an agricultural journalist. The author "organized, connected, and commented upon the documents, seeking to describe, explain, and interpret his life and define his historical significance" (3). Because Uncle Henry was such a lucid and prolific writer, the result is an eminently readable narrative that addresses many of the important issues, rural and urban, that were debated in America during the two decades before and after 1900.

The Henry Wallace that Kirkendall describes was a "modernizer," and in many ways a quintessential reformer of the Progressive era. Convinced that farmers must learn to farm smarter, Wallace became a leading supporter of the agricultural colleges and used his position as editor of the *Iowa Homestead* and later *Wallaces' Farmer* to disseminate information about new farming techniques to often skeptical farmers. Before it became generally fashionable, Wallace advocated conservation, crop rotation, and other methods to preserve the soil's fertility.

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.

REVIEWED BY CURTIS HARNACK, NEW YORK CITY

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.

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