

tion Reserve Program (in the 1980s) targeted for removal from production is in the dry-farming regions. Government policy often has supported less efficient agricultural methods at the expense of dry farming. As the federal government relocated farmers from dry-farming areas to help control production and limit soil erosion, it also promoted costly irrigation projects. The large investment required to develop irrigated agriculture actually results in a relatively small increase in land in production. Despite concerns that dry farming is not as cost-effective and productive as other methods, Hargreaves documents the production levels of dry-farming areas. Dry farming is viable and cost-effective as a result of farmer initiative when responding to changing demands of the weather and the desire to increase production while using fewer acres. Hargreaves contends that a government policy that targets dry-farming areas for production limitation is misplaced and counterproductive.

This volume is a well-researched and thoroughly documented study of agricultural development in the western Dakotas and eastern Montana. Hargreaves used U.S. Department of Agriculture statistical reports, in-house studies, and state agricultural reports along with manuscript collections, newspapers, and numerous secondary sources for her study. The result is a book of immense value. The conclusion that dry farming should be encouraged as a method to feed the world might be contested; the conclusion that dry farming has been a productive method cannot be denied.

*Letters from the Front, 1898–1945*, edited by Michael E. Stevens. Voices of the Wisconsin Past Series. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1992. xii, 175 pp. Illustrations, suggested readings, index. \$7.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY KEVIN B. BYRNE, GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

Michael Stevens writes in the introduction to *Letters from the Front* that "war, with all its problems and contradictions, cannot and should not be forgotten" (v). Thanks to collections such as this one, it will not be. General readers and specialists alike interested in knowing more about wartime experiences of twentieth-century Americans will profit from an examination of these letters.

This slim volume succeeds admirably in providing us with the perspectives of dozens of Wisconsinites caught up in the Spanish-American War and the subsequent war for Filipino independence, World War I, or World War II. The voices behind the letters are those

of men and women in the armed services or the Red Cross, writing home to family and friends. Their observations are a blend of the mundane—important for us to discover in its own right—and the surprising. All can be thought provoking. The writers are for the most part enlisted men seldom interested in issues of grand strategy. The book reverberates with voices from barracks, training camps, battlefields, cockpits, wardrooms, field hospitals, even prisoner of war camps—in short, from a remarkable gamut of vantage points. They are the voices of ordinary midwesterners at extraordinary moments in their lives.

The allocation of coverage reflects the intensity and duration of American participation in the wars: the Spanish-American War receives 25 pages, World War I twice that number; the entire second half of the volume is devoted to World War II, although proportionally less to combat. This chronological sweep affords an opportunity to observe the similarities inherent in military service at any time, as well as the specific circumstances that applied to different wars. The editor, furthermore, provides brief introductions at appropriate points to set the historical context for each war. Informative headings present basic biographies of the letter writers. Occasional photos add a visual dimension. The emphasis, however, remains where it should, on the human stories the letters convey.

Commenting on the American Civil War, Walt Whitman once observed that “the real war will never get into the books.” A book of wartime letters, too, has its limits. First, military censors used their powers broadly to delete sensitive material, and even the awareness of censorship no doubt limited what was put down on paper. Second, as Whitman foresaw, human beings often prove unwilling or unable to describe the sheer unpleasantness of warfare. While the letters in this volume do not describe graphically some of the more shocking but common occurrences in combat, they neither romanticize nor sanitize war. They do, in fact, provide glimpses of “real war.” Carefully culled from collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, they relate much that was unpleasant about war, ranging from boredom (a common complaint in every war) to body lice to the sounds and sights of battle and its aftermath. The picture that emerges is wonderfully multifaceted.

No review can do justice to the sheer variety of realizations that these letters provoke. A quick sample only suggests the richness here. There is the plaintive letter written in 1898 from Puerto Rico, lamenting that “the boys are dieing [*sic*] off very fast” due to the climate (12). A World War I doughboy writes, “It’s best for the people to think of ‘killed in action’ as being killed by a bullet wound through the heart

in an attack—they need not know what utter destruction it sometimes means” (56–57). Sounding a much different tone, another contends that a friend turned his underwear inside out every day in an effort to outsmart the lice. A World War II army nurse writes about the psychiatric cases she cares for, and a flier relates his initiation when crossing the equator for the first time. One letter describes the battle for Iwo Jima; another tells of the experience of seeing the concentration camp at Dachau soon after its liberation.

In publishing this book, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has done a service not merely for the citizens of the state, or for fellow midwesterners. It has provided a valuable service for us all. The letters make evident the human dimensions, and the human costs, of war, and they enable us to share vicariously in the experiences of people like ourselves in moments of national and often personal crisis.

*Townships*, edited by Michael Martone. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992. 210 pp. Photographs, notes on contributors. \$29.95 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT F. SAYRE, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Collected here are twenty-four memoirs of growing up in the north central Middle West. Editor Martone wanted the authors to give their sense of the “bordered regions of their childhoods” (12), and “township” struck him as the quintessential such midwestern space. The photographs by Raymond Bial, taken in small towns in Illinois and Indiana in the 1980s, complement the memoirs by being of similar places (mostly). Yet they also clash with them by representing a later era, the depressed present. It is as if the photographer could not quite choose between protest and memory, Walker Evans and Eugene Atget.

The brilliance of the memoirs is in their variety and vitality. This might be expected of the authors raised in cities, such as Stuart Dybek (Chicago) and Philip Levine (Detroit), who are sort of sneaked in the back door. But it is just as true of small-town and country authors such as Amy Clampitt (Hardin County, Iowa), C. J. Hribal (northern Wisconsin), and Ellen Hunnicutt (Jay County, Indiana). In the 1930s, '40s, and '50s the rural Middle West was a place of all kinds of eccentricity and excess, not just a “good place to raise kids,” as parents said, but a good place to raise writers. The sorrow is that it may not be any more. As Paul Gruchow testifies in his angry essay on the depopulation of rural Minnesota, his township is effectively gone. All that is left of his country school is a rusting pump in a plowed field. Farm

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