

## *Floyd Dell in Iowa*

WILLIAM H. ROBA

From 1910 until 1920 Floyd Dell was a major force in American literature, becoming a bellwether of literary experimentation. In Chicago he helped to fashion a midwestern resurgence of writing; later, in New York, he was at the center of the Provincetown Players who discovered Eugene O'Neill and invented modern American drama.

Unfortunately for Dell, his fate for half a century has been to languish and be forgotten. *Quem di diligunt adulescens moritur*. His friends died young, thereby insuring their fame: John Reed died during the Russian Revolution, George Cook reached his apotheosis on the edge of Mount Olympus in Greece, and Randolph Bourne perished of disease. Dell died in 1969, virtually forgotten, meriting but a few seconds in Warren Beatty's recent movie production of *Reds* (1981).

Dell's family exerted the strongest influence on his writing. He was born in Barry, Illinois, in 1887, the youngest son in a family of three brothers and a sister. His father, Anthony Dell, was an impecunious butcher who moved his family to the old river town of Quincy. It was there that Dell first felt the shame of being poor: as the family's fortunes plummeted, the bric-a-brac table in the kitchen containing mementoes of earlier times became for him a symbol of lost respectability.<sup>1</sup> In 1903 the family moved again, this time upriver to Davenport, Iowa. His mother, Kate Crone Dell, had been a country schoolteacher, and she encouraged her son to write. His father was a Civil War veteran whose tenuous connection to the Republican party helped his son get a newspaper job and protected the son after Dell had publicly joined the local Socialist party.

Although Dell left Iowa in 1908, he returned to Davenport on numerous occasions. The death of his parents in the early 1920s seemed to shatter his career and he left for Europe in 1925 in order to write his

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<sup>1</sup> Floyd Dell, *Homecoming* (New York: Farrar, 1933). "He was irked by the narrow life of his own poor boyhood struggling to keep afloat above indigence in the cramped towns of Illinois and Iowa." Harlan Hatcher, *Creating the Modern American Novel* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), 75.

next book. Suffering apparent psychosomatic illness, he returned to New York City in a third-class tourist liner. For “ten weeks he had three acute attacks of gastritis” while failing to find inspiration, so he “decided to come home and write his book in Greenwich Village.”<sup>2</sup> He spent the next decade floundering about as he tried to find a new literary niche.

Consciously Dell created a persona of “the young rebel in Davenport,” a public image which he maintained for 30 years. His pattern of rebelling began in the summer of 1904 when he decided to drop out of Davenport High School. “I had made up my mind, and then had stopped thinking about it; I had not said anything to my mother, because I did not want her to feel bad about it in prospect . . . I announced it with such a casual decisiveness that nobody said anything, except my mother, who said softly, ‘I’m sorry.’ ”<sup>3</sup> His rejection of public education was not unusual; many of his Davenport High School classmates “dropped out,” but not his contemporaries who became writers after attending college. Dell later recalled that

There was a plan, of which I did not hear until several years later, to see me through college. A man known for his generous assistance in helping young people of promise in that way was invited to dinner with me. I did not know what was afoot, but I remember the evening very well. The subject of a college education in general was brought up, and I was asked what I thought about it. I, from my Socialist ramparts, blasted college education with a withering fire of criticism. My tactful hostess asked me if I did not think colleges were of value if one were going to be a writer. I demolished the pretensions of colleges in that respect also . . . The talk then turned to something else.<sup>4</sup>

His rebelliousness in Davenport was recalled by Harry Hansen, who wrote that Dell “walked as if he were treading on eggs and who smiled faintly and deferentially at whatever was said especially when he did not believe it, and then would disturb a gathering of callow high-school youths by opening a serious debate on whether the chicken or the egg came first.”<sup>5</sup> Francis Hackett, who agreed to Dell working as his assistant for the *Friday Literary Review* in Chicago, described the same behavior. In Hackett’s opinion, Dell created and enjoyed “social havoc” with comments that “established Dell as rude, insulting, egotistic, unprincipled, dangerous.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, October 14, 1925.

<sup>3</sup> *Homecoming*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Hansen, *Midwest Portraits; A Book of Memories and Friendships* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923):209-10.

<sup>6</sup> *Bookman* 57, no. 1 (March 1923):66. See Louis J. Bragman, “The Case of Floyd Dell: A Study in the Psychology of Adolescence,” *Journal of American Psychiatry* 93 (May 1937):1401-11.

Besides his habit of stirring up trouble with unconventional comments, he appeared unconventional. "Tall and slender, with a mobile and expressive face that tapered from a broad forehead to a gently pointed chin, he always struck people as 'the model of the romantic esthete.'" <sup>7</sup> Joseph Freeman recalled his first meeting with Floyd Dell. While sitting at a Greenwich Village restaurant called Three Steps Down, Freeman noticed a man who "came in and sat down at a nearby table. The more I looked at this thin, translucent, sensitive face, with its large eyes and 1890 sideburns, the more familiar it seemed."<sup>8</sup>

Dell refined his aesthetic image with poetry, spending his spare time in the newly built Davenport Public Library. He read voraciously yet primarily upon impulse as he roamed the stacks which held 18,000 volumes. He read fiction indiscriminately, realizing that "a girl in a public library book is either a good girl or a bad girl, and there are no two ways about it."<sup>9</sup> Soon the head librarian developed a program of reading for the high school dropout.<sup>10</sup>

In a very telling passage in his autobiography, Dell modified Plato's analogy of the cave by referring to the tranquility of a public library, "where years pass quickly" and "one may grow as old as Rip Van Winkle in that enchanted cave, while remaining a child in the outside world."<sup>11</sup> For one year he chose an imitation of life within the public library cave and the guidance of a firemaker, the head librarian.

Marilla Freeman (1875-1961) influenced the literary career of Floyd Dell. She was a descendant of Miles Standish who had received a degree from the University of Chicago in 1897, graduated from the New York State Library School in 1900, and left the Newberry Library in Chicago before moving to Davenport as the first professionally trained librarian. Dell had romance in mind, not book selection, when he recalled the 29-year-old librarian. She was "an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, tall and slender, widebrowed, with soft dark hair, grey-blue eyes, a tender, whimsical mouth, and a lively voice. . . ."<sup>12</sup> For Dell their relationship was not student to teacher, but rather "worshipper and child to some lovely and infinitely maternal Goddess."<sup>13</sup>

Part of Marilla Freeman's "program" for Dell was the writing of poetry; in addition he created his own booklets of poetry. "After I had

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<sup>7</sup> Alden Whitman, *New York Times*, July 30, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> *An American Testament* (New York: Farrar, 1936), 243.

<sup>9</sup> *Homecoming*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 31, 1961. Cleveland Public Library Archives.

<sup>11</sup> *Homecoming*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Moon-Calf* (New York: Knopf, 1920), 176.

written a poem, I made several copies of it, or of a group of poems, in booklet form, neatly lettered with a picture drawn on the cover, and gave them to my friends. I thus had the pleasure of immediate publication of my poems.”<sup>14</sup> He also had the satisfaction of seeing his poetry in print in one of the local newspapers which printed his poem “The Founders.”<sup>15</sup> Under Marilla’s tutelage and with the assistance of Charles E. Banks, a former local newspaperman who wrote poetry, during the next two years Dell wrote several poems which were eventually published in national magazines.<sup>16</sup> This poetry “reflected his early addiction to such romantics as Swinburne, Housman, and Shelley,” a romanticism that became an integral part of his public image.<sup>17</sup> Harry Hansen recalled how happy he was to listen to Dell reciting one of his poems that had been accepted for publication. “This was the nearest I had ever come to knowing a successful author, and I glowed by reflected light.”<sup>18</sup>

Dell landed a job on the *Davenport Times* in late 1904, and for two years he struggled to combine newspaper work with poetry. He grew to dislike the impersonality of reporting. As he put it, “one had to be an eye and an ear, an organizing memory, a pencil and a pad of paper and two fingers above a typewriter, rather than a person; my own opinions, feelings, convictions and tastes had to be shoved out of the way so that they would not interfere with getting people’s confidence and eliciting a story from them.”<sup>19</sup> On the brink of dismissal, he kept his job by writing a human-interest story about a mother who died after arriving on the Rock Island Railroad Golden State Limited, leaving her children behind in the train depot.<sup>20</sup> Addie May Swan, literary editor of the *Davenport Times*, recalled that his poetry writing probably got him fired. Based on the memories of co-workers, “the Muse beckoned him at a time when he should have been writing a news story to which he had been assigned.”<sup>21</sup>

Dell strengthened his unconventional image by publicly embracing socialism. He had leafletted plant gates for the presidency of Eugene V.

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<sup>14</sup> *Homecoming*, 106. His mother saved these booklets and so did Marilla Freeman, who remembered “those very early verses, of which hand-illuminated copies may be found in my portfolio!” *Personal Glimpses of Some Modern Poets* (Cleveland: Drexel Institute: 1940), 2. Cleveland Public Library Archives.

<sup>15</sup> *Davenport Democrat*, March 25, 1943 reprinted the original poem of 1905.

<sup>16</sup> “Waifs,” *McClure’s* 30, no. 5 (March 1908):590; “Actaeon,” *Century* 76, no. 4 (August 1908):494; “Seeker,” *Harper’s* 118, no. 3 (February 1909):440; “Tamburlaine,” *Harper’s* 118, no. 2 (January 1909):299.

<sup>17</sup> John T. Flanagan, “A Decade of Middlewestern Autobiography,” *Centennial Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1982):123.

<sup>18</sup> Harry Hansen, “Davenport Boyhood,” *Palimpsest* 37, no. 4 (April 1956):215.

<sup>19</sup> *Homecoming*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> *Davenport Times*, February 14, 1905.

<sup>21</sup> *Davenport Times*, October 7, 1933.

Debs in 1904 and had joined the socialist local in Davenport. He adopted a brand of socialism which combined municipal ownership of public services with the more utopian outlook of George Bernard Shaw and the Fabian Society in England. As a teenager, Dell thought that socialists “believed in another kind of world than the one we lived in, and were helping to bring it about—a world of justice and beauty and order.”<sup>22</sup> The rhetoric of socialism provided Dell with solace for his own family disappointments, and the meeting of the local replaced the hours spent at the library. Dell’s fictionalized self, Felix Fay, “found happiness at last. It seemed that he entered, at first only for moments, and then for long golden hours, an enchanted land in which there was neither desire or fear—only the solace of magic words.”<sup>23</sup>

Dell’s first attack on established beliefs came with his writing for the *Tri-City Workers Magazine*, a periodical designed “to discuss all public questions of local and general interest from the viewpoint of those workers who clearly understand this class division and class struggle.”<sup>24</sup> The magazine contained poetry, advertising, articles, editorials, and a series of “muckraking” exposés presenting an “inside view” of modern industrial settings such as a candy factory, department store, cigar factory, corn planter workers, and a button factory. For one year this became Dell’s showcase for five pseudonymous articles, one article on the kindergarten movement and his first book review. He enjoyed support from another new arrival in Davenport, Fritz Feuchter, a mail carrier who supported Dell in his investigative journalism. Feuchter became the fictional character Vogelsang who told Dell’s alter ego, “You have been mooning about, writing verses about life instead of living.”<sup>25</sup> Although the magazine folded after the municipal election of 1906, it provided Dell with necessary modifications to his public persona.

On the one hand, Dell found in Iowa a city where he could revolt against established authority. He could criticize the library board, the

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<sup>22</sup> *Homecoming*, 18. Gerhard Bach discusses the unique aspects of the Davenport socialists in “Susan Glaspell Revisited: A Workshop Report,” *Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature Newsletter* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1976):2-4. A public debate on socialism occurred in the spring of 1904. See *Davenport Democrat* May 31, 1904. See also Ernest Boyd, “A Literary Causerie,” *Independent* 112, no. 9 (April 26, 1924):230. John Chamberlain wrote that Dell was “a student of Marx, he yet betrays himself as having been wholly mid-West populist in his social philosophy. . . . He is a walking contradiction.” *New York Times*, September 29, 1933. Dell describes Felix Fay as “the incorrigible Utopian.” *Moon-Calf*, 287.

<sup>23</sup> *Moon-Calf*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> “Salutatory,” *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 1 (November 1905):2. J. C. Gibson was the editor.

<sup>25</sup> *Moon-Calf*, 218; *Davenport Democrat*, February 13, 1940.

school board, and Brick Munro's bawdy dance halls.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Davenport was a place where his rebellion was tolerated. He later admitted that he encountered "an unexpected general tolerance for what were regarded as my rash but interesting youthful ideas."<sup>27</sup> His fictionalized portrayal of the city described a pleasant city: "its long tree-shaded streets, its great parks, its public buildings, even its shops and homes . . . had a kind of dignity and serenity, as though in this town it was understood that life was meant to be enjoyed."<sup>28</sup> At the close of his novel *Moon-Calf*, Dell as Felix mused about how Davenport had been built for nurturing. "It had been built for young men and girls to be happy in, to adventure in, and to think strange and free and perilous thoughts."<sup>29</sup> In one of his visits home, Dell publicized his novel by stressing again his pleasant thoughts about Davenport. "It was a place where I found . . . friendship and beauty and adventure in the world of ideas."<sup>30</sup> Dell was not inclined to reject the small town as Sinclair Lewis so satirically did in the 1920s.<sup>31</sup>

Cautiously experimenting with short stories before 1920, Dell based his first three stories on Davenport experiences. In all three Dell develops the theme of an individual struggling against the social demand to conform. In "Flower o' the Peach" he describes the choice made by Hoang Lo in favor of traditional Chinese customs instead of a missionary's offering of Christian baptism.<sup>32</sup> Five years later Dell reused this theme in describing how an anonymous poet chose poetry instead of a beautiful woman's soul.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Dell worked out another variation on

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<sup>26</sup> "Why People Go to Brick Munro's," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 11 (September 1906):2.

<sup>27</sup> *Homecoming*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. The same passage is used in *Moon-Calf*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> *Moon-Calf*, 394.

<sup>30</sup> *Davenport Democrat*, June 26, 1921.

<sup>31</sup> George Tanselle, "Sinclair Lewis and Floyd Dell: Two Views of the Midwest," *Twentieth Century Literature* 9, no. 4 (January 1964):175-84. A recent example of this confusion is an article by Park Goist, "Community and Self in the Midwest Town: Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf*," *Midamerica* 2 (1975):88-92.

<sup>32</sup> "Flower o' the Peach" *Trident* 1, no. 27 (July 2, 1904):31-32. The title for his first short story is at first glance quite puzzling. It seems unlikely that he was attempting to refer to the oriental metaphor of the "flower bud" as sexual awakening. See Charles Humana and Wang Wu, *Chinese Sex Secrets: A Look Behind the Screen* (New York: Gallery Books, 1984), pp. 18, 29, *passim*. A more likely meaning is the Iowa folk saying that if you pick the flower of a fruit, then you won't be able to eat it as a developed apple or peach. If this folk saying of Andrew, Iowa, is applied to the story, the Christian missionary should have waited for his convert to personally accept the new religion of Christianity, instead of pressuring the young Chinese boy, and eventually losing him to traditional beliefs.

<sup>33</sup> "The Woman and the Poet," *Mother Earth* 4, no. 8 (October 1909):251-55. This was one of several stories that he wrote in 1908 but the only one selected for Emma Goldman's magazine.

this theme with the story of Jessica Wyman, who rejects the small-town morality of Hazelton, Indiana, so she can dance in a “girlie show” at the White City Amusement Park in Chicago.<sup>34</sup> In all of these stories, Dell’s choice of theme reflected his image of the rebellious nonconformist.<sup>35</sup>

So strong was his preoccupation with the Rebellious Poet that Dell used it in his longer fiction. During his last two years in Davenport, he wrote an unpublished novel about an Episcopalian bishop who tried to stop the social disintegration of rural families who left the farm for the city.<sup>36</sup> During the next decade, he worked intermittently on a longer work, finally writing a thinly veiled account of his own life up to 1909. In his own words, “that novel [*Moon-Calf*] was based upon a selection of memories, with a very few bits of invention to piece it out.”<sup>37</sup> Dell argued that the difference between fact and fiction is selectivity; the picturesque disorder of the traditional fairy tale is really the “outlines of a very simple and orderly world.”<sup>38</sup> He created a dreamy-eyed youth, Felix Fay, explaining that the word “fay” was used to refer to a wood sprite who really wasn’t there. His friends rallied to his side in reviewing the novel. Harry Hansen extravagantly claimed that Dell was “assured by this one book of a permanent place in the literature of America.”<sup>39</sup> Others pointed out that it was only slightly fictional and that Felix Fay was really Floyd Dell.<sup>40</sup> Lucian Cary noted that “all unwittingly, the Middle West gives him everything he needs; or, more accurately, permits him to take everything he wants.”<sup>41</sup> Francis Hackett called him “the weak but ruthless literary apprentice.”<sup>42</sup> Dell never changed or modified his persona of misunderstood poet, and he continued the theme throughout the 1920s. One of his last novels, *Love without Money* (1931), shows the same preoccupation: “his theme is the same as always—Youth in Revolt—but his young people get nowhere in particular with their

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<sup>34</sup> “Jessica Screams,” *The Smart Set* 39, no. 4 (April 1913):113-20.

<sup>35</sup> It is curious that Dell did not pursue short fiction. Perhaps this is an indication of the incredible strength of his self-image of misunderstood poet.

<sup>36</sup> *Homecoming*, 137-38.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, ix. The blurring of autobiography and novel genres in the writing of E. L. Doctorow is discussed by Robert Towers, *New York Times Book Review* 32, no. 29 (December 14, 1985):23-25. Doctorow’s latest novel, *World’s Fair*, bears striking resemblance to Dell’s first novel.

<sup>38</sup> Floyd Dell, “The Difference between Life and Fiction,” *New Republic* 30, no. 7 (April 12, 1922):7. Reprinted in *Men and Books*, ed. Malcolm S. MacLean and Elisabeth Holmes (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), 156-60.

<sup>39</sup> *Chicago Daily News*, October 27, 1920.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Times Book Review* (December 12, 1920):20; Arturo Giovannitti, *Liberator* 3, no. 12 (December 1920):26.

<sup>41</sup> “The Problem of the Sensitive Soul,” *Freeman* 2, no. 43 (January 5, 1921):403.

<sup>42</sup> “Moon-Calf,” *New Republic* 25, no. 2 (December 8, 1920):49.

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CHILDREN AND THE MACHINE AGE

From the Seventh Iowa Conference on Child  
Development and Parent Education

By  
FLOYD DELL

CHILD WELFARE PAMPHLETS

No. 35

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New Series No. 752

August 11, 1934

Floyd Dell's contribution to a series of pamphlets on child welfare published by The University of Iowa in 1934. At that time Dell had two children of his own approaching high school age. From a copy in The University of Iowa Archives.

rebellion—except, as is usual in this author's books, to Chicago."<sup>43</sup> At the very end of his literary career, Dell combined his first two novels into an autobiography, ironically titled *Homecoming* (1933).

He had left the Midwest in 1913 and was to move to Washington, D.C., in 1933 as a New Deal administrator and ghostwriter for Eleanor Roosevelt. In the section on Davenport, poetry is used effectively to indicate the major turning points in his life. Eleanor McLaughlin commented on Dell's "urge to produce in verse every nuance of his variegated reactions to the constantly changing panorama of events."<sup>44</sup> Another reviewer explained how "these Davenport girls, indeed, in addition to being beautiful, amiable and intelligent, had a very keen sense of reality. They knew a young poet was nobody to marry. And so, in rapid succession they broke his heart and gave him more subjects for poetry. No one could do more for a poet."<sup>45</sup> Dell's 30 years of image creation came through clearly in his memories.

Dell used his persona to his own advantage, even though he developed a hard-hitting basis for literary analysis and criticism, completely at odds with the dreamy-eyed, innocent, youthful rebel. As a critic he demanded a realistic and politically aware basis of literature. Dell claimed that the origin of his philosophical view was in Davenport, where he began "taking the sociological view of literature."<sup>46</sup> His first book review appeared in the pages of the *Tri-City Workers Magazine*. In analyzing Phillip Rappaport's *Looking Forward: A Treatise on the Status of Women* (1906), he used the occasion as a springboard for an informal essay, observing that "every once in a while you come across a short story in the Socialist paper you are taking, that you think is better than anything you have read for a year. You cut it out and save it, or if you are a woman you paste it in your Socialist scrapbook."<sup>47</sup>

While in Chicago, Dell instinctively used his critical apparatus to organize a movement of change. His mentor in Chicago, Francis Hackett, captured the essential Dell "as a small boy running ahead of the parade—and always knowing intuitively which corner the parade is going to

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<sup>43</sup> Robert M. Coates, "Old Home Week," *New Yorker* 7, no. 37 (October 31, 1931):71-72.

<sup>44</sup> *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, November 25, 1933. Henry Hook, secretary of the Davenport Area Foundation, recalls that she was the newspaper's society editor for almost 40 years "who loved literature and limericks more than the dull chores of doing weddings, engagements." Letter to the Author, January 4, 1986.

<sup>45</sup> Donald R. Murphy, "The Wives and Mistresses of Floyd Dell," *Des Moines Register*, January 7, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> John T. Flanagan, "A Letter from Floyd Dell," *American Literature* 45, no. 3 (November 1973):446.

<sup>47</sup> "Recent Books," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 11 (September 1906):19.

# HOMECOMING

*An  
Autobiography*

*by*

FLOYD  
DELL

FARRAR & RINEHART

INCORPORATED

P u b l i s h e r s

N e w Y o r k

Title page of Floyd Dell's autobiography, *Homecoming*, published in 1933. From a copy in The University of Iowa Libraries.

turn.”<sup>48</sup> Hackett was the literary editor of the *Chicago Evening Post* and had created the *Friday Literary Review* as an eight-page weekly supplement, which issued pronouncements on the latest literature. When Dell assumed the editorship, he hired his Davenport friend George Cook as his assistant, and the two of them interpreted the latest fiction and championed the newest writers. In this way Dell was a formative influence in the Chicago literary movement of pre-World War I America, not as an innovator or discoverer of talent but as a literary cheerleader who publicly supported psychology, socialism, and feminism from the forum that Hackett had provided him.<sup>49</sup> “He had made a reputation in Chicago as a critic whose mind was unfettered by genteel and classical dogmas—a young man of fresh and liberal views, responsive to every experimental and unconventional movement.”<sup>50</sup> As a result, his forum spotlighted Sherwood Anderson, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters.

Dell is also important for his involvement in the Provincetown Players. His interest in plays can be traced back to his years as a Davenport reporter. He was greatly influenced by Charles Eugene Banks (1852-1932). Banks had been born in Iowa and lived for a time in Davenport before moving to Chicago in 1898. While living in Davenport he had coauthored the play *In Hampton Roads* (1900) with George Cram Cook. He returned briefly to Davenport in the winter of 1905 for the opening of his new play, *An American Woman*. This play featured a young newspaper reporter described by the local reviewer in glowing terms: “the exuberance of his youth, his all-abiding faith in himself, his love of the ‘scoop’ and even his love-making were all that could be desired.”<sup>51</sup> Dell immediately identified with the stage character of the “cub” and his own position on the *Davenport Times*. He recalled that Banks “taught me patiently how to criticise my own work, and how to revise it—a lesson of more use to me later in prose than in poetry.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “Floyd Dell,” *Bookman* 57, no. 1 (March 1923):65.

<sup>49</sup> See Bernard Duffy, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1954); George Tanselle, “Faun at the Barricades: The Life and Work of Floyd Dell,” Northwestern University, Ph.D., 1959, 88-104; Cynthia Schmidt, “Socialist-Feminism: Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, and Crystal Eastman,” Marquette University, Ph.D., 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard Smith, *Forces in American Criticism: A Study in the History of American Literary Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 296. His romantic attachment to psychological ideas is discussed by Leslie Fishbein, “Floyd Dell: The Impact of Freud and Marx on a Radical Mind,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 63, no. 2 (1976):267-89.

<sup>51</sup> *Davenport Times*, January 12, 1905.

<sup>52</sup> *Homecoming*, 92.

Dell's enthusiasm for drama flamed anew when he became the best friend of George Cram Cook, the well-educated son of a prominent family in Davenport. The two became an "odd couple": Cook was 32 years old and tired of his first marriage; Dell was 20 and unemployed. Cook's mother called them "a St. Bernard following a little terrier around."<sup>53</sup> The older Cook became an advocate of socialism and the two lived in a cabin on the Cook estate. They imagined that they lived a Bohemian existence, discussing their rebellious ideas while Dell fell in love with Cook's second wife, Mollie Price, a little girl with dark hair who talked about writers and restaurants in New York City. Dell later recalled that "Mollie and I talked and laughed together happily; and neither of us guessed how mournfully superannuated a husband in his middle thirties could feel as he looked from his study and saw his young wife with his young friend, a girl with a boy, eager, happy, carefree. He brooded, twisting his forelock."<sup>54</sup> Within a year Cook divorced his second wife in order to marry Susan Glaspell, a woman about the age of Marilla Freeman. This new threesome had enormous dramatic affinities: Dell, Cook, and Glaspell eventually became the nucleus of the Provincetown Players.

The friendship between Dell and Cook continued as they moved to Chicago, even though Susan Glaspell remained a disruptive factor. In a revealing passage in his autobiography, Dell said that "while I loved George, and knew how hard he was taking it all, I had had my feelings very badly hurt by Susan before I left Davenport and I hadn't been able quite to forgive her, so that I wasn't the most sympathetic possible person with respect to George's emotional predicament."<sup>55</sup> Things were eventually smoothed over and Dell worked hard to popularize his friend's second novel, *The Chasm* (1911). While visiting his parents the next year, Dell lectured before the local Socialist League of America club, comparing Cook to Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser in writing a philosophical novel "which is a part of men's lives, which really influences people's conduct, which has a vital relation to the modern world."<sup>56</sup>

From 1913 until 1920 Dell remained part of the group which recruited their friends from Greenwich Village to write and produce plays during the summer in Provincetown. Their greatest discovery was Eugene O'Neill, as Dell, Cook, and the others staged nearly one hundred plays by

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<sup>53</sup> *Homecoming*, 202.

<sup>54</sup> *Homecoming*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> *Homecoming*, 202.

<sup>56</sup> *Davenport Times*, April 16, 1912.

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not Beatrice or Bertha; Kate, but  
not Caroline or Cecily, etc.

A book on names in fiction would  
be interesting; but such articles & as  
I have seen among me by praising  
the obviously wrong things - as for  
example the preposterous names  
of Hardy's romantic Quids = like  
heroines and comic rustics.

Faithfully yours,  
Floyd Dell

Nov. 5, 1923

Cortau = on = Hudson, N.H.

1920. Dell was at the center of a collective movement, writing several one-act plays depicting the sophisticated, Bohemian life of Greenwich Village.<sup>57</sup> By the early 1920s Cook and Glaspell had left for Europe, and Dell “thought that Cook was a failure because he hadn’t written any successful books and also because Cook himself felt that he had failed.”<sup>58</sup> The Provincetown Players clearly revolved around the dreams of Cook, and Dell’s role declined as O’Neill’s climbed.<sup>59</sup> The very instability of the group insured that it would find new American talent (47 playwrights were discovered), while retaining its amateur status.

Floyd Dell’s adolescent years in Iowa gave him the image of a boy genius of the “avant-garde.” As Sinclair Lewis put it, Dell was a midwestern Bambi, “a faun at the barricades” who belonged on the sunny bluffs by the Mississippi.<sup>60</sup> But beneath that public image it becomes clear that on at least two occasions Dell was at the center of major changes in American literature: Chicago in 1912 and Provincetown in 1915. By the mid 1930s John Chamberlain pointed to the crucial position of Dell as among those “who, though not the most talented of their generation, yet seem to sit like spiders at the centre of things. . . . They are more symbolic of the time-spirit than many more gifted contemporaries. The currents of an epoch beat against them, pushing them now this way and now that.”<sup>61</sup> His public image allowed Dell to go far, but ultimately it trapped him and he was unable to break loose. One of his own poems, “The Song of Earth,” written when he was only 17, captures some of the intrinsic longing of this fabricated self.

’Neath shifting sands of twice ten thousand years,  
It lies, the lost Atlantis of my youth;  
And this I have to show my sister spheres—  
A dead dream, and these lingering tribes uncouth.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Floyd Dell, *The Angel Intrudes* (New York: Egmont Arens, 1918) and *King Arthur’s Socks and Other Village Plays* (New York: Knopf, 1922). See Robert E. Humphrey, *Children of Fantasy: The First Rebels of Greenwich Village* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

<sup>58</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, “The Instinct to Conform,” *New Republic* 77, no. 3 (November 29, 1933):80.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Sarlos, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1982). See also Arnold Goldman, “The Culture of the Provincetown Players,” *Journal of American Studies* 12 (December 1978):291-310. Dell kept working on plays, writing a popular Broadway hit *A Little Accident* (1927). This was made into a Gary Cooper comedy, *Casanova Brown* (1944).

<sup>60</sup> “Floyd Dell,” *Bookman* 53, no. 3 (May 1921):245.

<sup>61</sup> *New York Times*, September 29, 1933.

<sup>62</sup> *Homecoming*, 107.

What had propelled him to national fame eventually trapped him like a "dead dream," because after remarrying and having his first child in 1921, he was unable to maintain the image. After the publication of *Homecoming*, he gave up writing and in 1935 became a New Deal administrator in Washington. When he retired in 1947 he wrote occasional articles and granted a few interviews, still trying to keep alive the memory of his "lost youth."

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2. "Dies on Train Returning Home," *Davenport Times* (February 14, 1905).
3. "The Founders" (poem), *Davenport Democrat* (October 22, 1905). Reprinted (March 25, 1943).
4. [Thersites], "Diphtheria in Davenport," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 2 (December 1905):5-6.
5. "Socialists and Kindergartens," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 4 (February 1906):7-11.
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7. [Vesuvius], "Our Autocratic School Board," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 7 (May 1906):13-14.
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10. "Recent Books," *Tri-City Workers Magazine* 1, no. 11 (September 1906):19-20.
11. "Waifs" (poem), *McClure's* 30, no. 5 (March 1908):590.
12. "Actaeon" (poem), *Century* 76, no. 76, (August 1908):494.
13. "Tamburlaine" (poem), *Harper's* 118, no. 2 (January 1909):299.
14. "Seeker," *Harper's* 118, no. 3 (February 1909):440.
15. "The Woman and the Poet," *Mother Earth* 4, no. 8 (October 1909):251-55.