

J. Hyatt Downing: The Chronicle of an Era

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When J. Hyatt Downing recently gave the greater part of his manuscripts, scrapbooks, and letters to The University of Iowa Libraries, his papers revealed the highly varied and interesting career of a dedicated writer: born and reared in small towns in Iowa and South Dakota; sometime sheep herder, gandy dancer, cowboy, tax collector, insurance salesman, and reporter; author of five well-reviewed novels, over thirty stories, and letters pointing to personal or professional relationships with such figures as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Boyd, Ruth Suckow, Harold Ober, and Maxwell Perkins. The Downing collection holds something of value for aspiring writers and for students of history as well as of literature, because it contains both the personal story of one writer's success and failure, trial and achievement, and the fictional chronicle of an era in the history of the American Middle West between 1880 and 1930.

Although a great deal of the historical detail which appears in Mr. Downing's books is based upon research, the greater part of his fiction emerges from the experiences of his background, upbringing, and early years on his own. He was born March 8, 1887, in Granville, Iowa. After several years, however, his father, J. H. Downing, moved the family to Hawarden, where Ruth Suckow's father was the minister of their church. In one of his letters Mr. Downing fondly recalls picking leeches off Ruth's legs in the Rock River when they were young, and later when they were both in New York City, engaging in a heated argument about Shakespeare which she almost won by nudging him toward the tracks of an oncoming subway train.

Shortly the Downing family moved again, this time to Blunt, South Dakota, at a time when that area was changing from a cattle ranching country to a farming community. After an unsuccessful attempt at ranching, Mr. Downing's father operated a lumber yard in Blunt from 1902 until 1905. Hyatt Downing remembers his father from these years

as a hard but fair man, not easily given to open emotion, and particularly not with his son. This trying relationship between the growing boy and his father is noticeable in much of Mr. Downing's early fiction, especially in his first novel, *A Prayer for Tomorrow*. In addition, this Dakota territory with its "warm, rich sunlight," as well as its wind storms "so terrible that clots of dust formed under the floorboards" provides the setting for many of his stories and three of his novels.

Hyatt Downing's mother, Lucy Munday Downing, was a persevering woman who came from stalwart English stock. Mr. Downing proudly recalls that his great-great grandfather stood in the British squares at Waterloo, and that his mother's god-father was none other than Charles Dickens. The heroines of the early stories owe much of their characteristic love and steadfastness to Lucy Downing's example, an example Hyatt Downing affectionately acknowledged by dedicating his second book, *Hope of Living*, to "my mother, the lamp of whose faith never dimmed."

After the ranching experience Hyatt Downing left home, and at the age of seventeen was hired as a rear tapeman on a geodetic survey for the Northwestern Railroad. The survey took him from Casper to the Wind River Mountains and into the Teton and Jackson Hole regions of Wyoming. Besides providing the young Downing with his first look at some of the broad vistas which he was later to describe in his fiction with familiarity and power, the experience later evoked a sympathetic response to the description of the same territory in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*.¹ Then, as he writes, "I had a wire from my dad saying Mother wanted to see me, and since he enclosed \$50, I went home. He sent me to the University of South Dakota."² Like his father, however, Hyatt Downing was restless. After two years he again drifted, working in Wyoming, Nebraska, and the Black Hills, doing everything from herding sheep to night-clerking in a hotel. When he finally returned to the University of South Dakota, where he was graduated in 1913, he distinguished himself by playing varsity football on the famous team of 1912, and by serving as literary editor of the college newspaper.

Unsuccessful attempts at newspaper work as well as at fiction writing in Sioux City and elsewhere followed graduation, and Mr. Downing took a job as deputy collector of internal revenue with head-

¹ Among the Downing papers is a letter from Owen Wister to Downing dated 17 March 1916, in which Wister recalls his first visit to Wyoming in 1887.

² Quoted from a biographical sketch, written in part by the author, which appeared in *Collier's Magazine* (December 1, 1945), p. 89.

quarters at Aberdeen, South Dakota. Then, in swift succession, he married a charming and level-headed nurse named Margery McGinnis, contracted tuberculosis, and found himself managing an alfalfa farm in Carlsbad, New Mexico, one of the first irrigated land projects in the state.

Hyatt Downing recently described his wife Marge as “a very remarkable woman,” and certainly the description is inadequate to reveal the character of the woman who nursed him back to health during the World War I years, who gave him a son, John, April 1, 1921, and who has shared his defeats and triumphs for over fifty years. Nevertheless, he quips, “I think some of her ancestors killed a lot of mine. They fought just like the Viet Cong. They hid out behind every furze bush and were generally able to knock over a British soldier daily. They caught fish in the little lakes and made their own false teeth out of clam shells. The one thing Marge can’t stand is to hear me mention the Connemara Irish who used to live down under the high bridge in St. Paul.”

It was after his recovery from tuberculosis that Hyatt Downing’s first successful fiction appeared. When he returned to the Middle West Mr. Downing began selling insurance for the Equitable Life Assurance Company, which took him eventually to St. Paul, New York, and Nashville, and he also sold his first story, entitled “Closed Roads,” to *Scribner’s Magazine*, then edited by Maxwell Perkins. Four more stories followed in *Scribner’s* until the home office of his insurance company offered him a handsomely-paid position on condition that he “quit writing them damn pieces.” Hyatt Downing did quit. “I didn’t touch a typewriter for seven years,” he recalls, and “I was about as unhappy as possible.” Nevertheless, it was from these five stories that the composite picture of a region and an era expanded into the later novels.

Hyatt Downing’s short story apprenticeship in *Scribner’s Magazine* developed his early experience with an economy of style, attention to detail, and above all a poignant atmosphere that is unsurpassed for its sensitivity and vividness even in the best of his novels. As much as he needed the length of the novel form to convey adequately the broader scope and panorama of his later narratives, the short story was a natural vehicle for his appreciation of the episodic, his ironic insights, and his uneven anecdotal style.

“Closed Roads,” which appeared in the August, 1925, issue of *Scribner’s*, is the story of a young man with musical talent who is suffocated by a dominating, insensitive father and by middlewestern farm life. Years later, as a mediocre violinist in a ship’s orchestra, he stays be-

hind when the liner sinks and realizes for a few brief moments a pure melodic heroism. The story is told, however, through the eyes of a farm machinery salesman, and the opening of the story sets the tone and establishes a characteristic Downing atmosphere through detailed depiction of weather, land, immediate place, and economic condition, all linked to the character's thoughts and frame of mind:

The land about me lay drenched and sodden. The clouds, blurred by the late November evening, hung low to the ground, heavy with their threat of rain. Somewhere, in the darkening distance, a dog barked loudly, once, and then fell silent. I shook the reins and slapped the jaded livery horse smartly, impatient with the weather and the mission which kept me out in it. Weather affects me, even though I am a machinery man, supposed to be as unresponsive to such things as the iron stuff he sells.

Then, the economic situation is closely woven into the narrative:

My work, that trip, had been entirely harmonious with the grey depressing days which followed unendingly upon each other's heels. I was collecting long overdue bills from farmers in a country where they hadn't had a crop in three years. The company didn't want to carry the accounts over and was taking what it could get—generally a mortgage on a few head of thin milch cows and work stock.

Finally, tightly drawn detail reinforces the desolation of man and place:

I had to drive carefully through the yard to avoid rusted heaps of old, wornout machinery and bits of broken boards and tangled coils of wire, red with weathering. A pig, thin and underfed, was rooting at the white fluff of a dead chicken.³

Edward O'Brien selected Mr. Downing's second story, "Rewards," which appeared in the April *Scribner's* issue, as one of the finest of the year in 1926. The ironic title introduces a piercingly real tragedy in presenting the story of a Dakota farm wife who has sacrificed and suffered, and has even been a little disingenuous with her brutal husband, to collect the funds with which to send her son to college. As James Gray wrote in a review for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, "the escape from the cruel monotony of her life which she has renounced for herself, she plans at last to achieve in her son. But there are renunciations of various kinds, and when the time has come for the son to go away, when the \$1,500 lies ready in the bank and the mother discovers that the boy is quite willing to renounce escape in favor of the Schultze

³ J. Hyatt Downing, "Closed Roads," *Scribner's Magazine* (August, 1925), pp. 191-201.

girl, with the brassy laugh and red lips, it's all right, his note assures her; she is not to worry. He prefers farming, really. And so life renews itself with the little spark of hope light-heartedly snatched away from the mother."⁴

"The Distance to Casper" followed in February of 1927. Again the "harsh, infinitely beautiful land" of great distances, the singing wind, and the austere background of the mountains depresses the heroine, Gail Cockran, and permeates the lives of the silent, isolated, lonely punchers and miners with the "ineffable sadness of human existence."

For "We Went West," May, 1928, Mr. Downing drew upon his railroad experience. The narrator, a young man, has been putting in track signs for the Northwestern Railroad on its Wyoming division for five months, and the central anecdote of the story is the depiction of a dog fight in Casper. "First Illusion," the last story to be published by *Scribner's* in May of 1930, presents a young boy of fourteen who has dreams of being a writer.

He'd probably have to live in New York. The editors would insist upon it. He would give out interviews to the magazines telling how he wrote only at night, after a light supper of milk and the white meat of chicken. How he always wrote standing at a drafting board, that his mind could function in no other position.⁵

It was also during this successful short story period, while living in St. Paul, that Hyatt Downing established friendships with Tom Boyd, Scott Fitzgerald, and Father Tom Baron, and where he met Sinclair Lewis and Joseph Hergesheimer in Boyd's Kilmarnoch Book Shop. Mr. Downing recalls in several letters "the log fire in the back room where all the writers used to come to meet, like Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis, who practically spent that Winter in Tom Boyd's bookshop. Father Baron whom we all loved, told Tom many, many times, to put out the fire in that big cavern and lock the door which opened inward. But he never did."

After the seven year lay-off, Mr. Downing quit his insurance job and returned to Sioux City with a thorough personal commitment to a writing career. Thereafter he finished his first novel, *A Prayer for Tomorrow* (1938), followed closely by *Hope of Living* (1939), *Sioux City* (1940), *Anthony Trant* (1941), and *The Harvest is Late* (1944). He also continued writing short stories which he sold to *Collier's*, *Good*

⁴ James Gray. "The World of Art, Books, and Drama," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 1, 1926.

⁵ J. Hyatt Downing, "First Illusion," *Scribner's Magazine* (May, 1930), pp. 560-568.

Housekeeping, Farm Journal, True, Country Gentleman, and Liberty.

Three of Hyatt Downing's novels, *A Prayer for Tomorrow, Hope of Living, and The Harvest is Late*, use the South Dakota background which he had already depicted with such success in his early stories. The ruin of the cattle lands and the disappearance of the free range provide the leitmotifs for these novels. It was a time when the government offered free land to anyone who would build a shack, stay five years and grow a crop; and when they heard the news, the farmers from Iowa and Minnesota descended on the prairie with their "breakin' plows" and a set look. They came in covered wagons, on horseback, on freight trains. They built fences around the old water holes, and built squat towns at the prairie's edge. They forced wheat, corn, and flax from an untillable land; and at last turned the matted ocean of buffalo grass that was the Dakota plain into the dust bowl.

A Prayer for Tomorrow, the best of these Dakota novels, and perhaps the finest entry in the entire Downing chronicle, presents a memoir of a prairie town, Rudge, and its people through the eyes of Lynn McVeigh, reducing the elaborate and detailed Main Street fabric to the adolescent adjustments of a sensitive boy. While most reviewers justly found fault with stiff characterization and mechanical plotting, consistent faults throughout all of the novels, a reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* aptly wrote: "It is when he writes about the eternal wind, sweeping sundrenched flatlands, about the harsh, dry coughing sound of tractors, the smell of dying crops, the contrasts of savage prairie winters and summer drought, that his novel achieves power, and beauty."⁶ *The Saturday Review of Literature* called the book "a novel of sober earnestness that is worthy of its tragic theme."⁷ The *New York Times*, which reviewed all of Mr. Downing's novels, was impressed by the "pleasant quality" of *A Prayer for Tomorrow*, but unreservedly found that *Hope of Living* "beyond doubt marks Mr. Downing as a writer who is going to be worth watching."⁸ More recently, the *Harvard Guide to American History* has listed *A Prayer for Tomorrow* in its "Select List of Historical Novels, 1900-1950."⁹

In his best seller and Book-of-the-Month selection, *Sioux City*, as well as its sequel, *Anthony Trant*, Hyatt Downing tells the story of this town on the Missouri River in the middle 1880's, when a prodigious

⁶ Jeannette Greenspan. *New York Herald Tribune*, Sunday Book Section. March 27, 1938.

⁷ *Saturday Review of Literature* (April 9, 1938), p. 6.

⁸ Margaret Wallace, *The New York Times* (March 12, 1939), p. 6.

⁹ *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 242.

boom in real estate prices rocketed it into brief national prominence. Historically, Sioux City was a logical center for agricultural trading, situated in the heart of the inexhaustibly fertile corn lands of Iowa and Nebraska. But to its promoters in the Eighties, caught up in the bright and feverish American dream of money for nothing, it seemed a younger and lustier Chicago; people talked first of a quarter then of half a million in prospective population. Cable cars and skyscrapers and elevated railways—to say nothing of a curious agricultural monstrosity, the Corn Palace, which even attracted President Grover Cleveland and his new bride for a visit—blossomed overnight on the plains. Sioux City, even as small Rudge before it, bears out a comment by Mr. Downing in a recent letter that “cities are like people. They all have their own individual personal characteristics.”

Against this background the hero of both novels, Anthony Trant, moves with adequate but not overwhelming dramatic interest. What is more consistently maintained in these novels are the values which Hyatt Downing not only believed in himself, but which he felt to be the finest aspirations of the “Great Middle Class” for which he wrote. It is, in fact, because Mr. Downing so completely accepted the assumptions behind these values, that he succeeded so well in speaking for the middle class, not only of a region, but of prewar America in general. Within an economic cycle of speculation, boom, and depression, he consistently presented individualism, personal responsibility and honor, prudence, industry, faith, and simplicity as qualities of mind, of character, of moral excellence. Mr. Downing justified this strongly ethical didacticism in an early interview. “A writer must not start to write until he has something to say, a vivid thought to bring out,” he said. “If all authors would write their own individual philosophies of life, their books would be more worthwhile. As in so many other fields, simplicity is the keynote to achievement, so we find it true in writing. Altogether too many authors think they must create a certain style in order to have their works read and remembered.”¹⁰

When Hyatt Downing sold the picture rights to *Sioux City* to David Selznik, producer of “Gone With the Wind,” the transaction heralded the subsequent move of the Downing family to Los Angeles. For the next twenty-five years Mr. Downing wrote publicity, radio scripts, another novel as yet unpublished, and a number of short stories. The feature articles and stories of this period are more interesting for comments written on the manuscripts than for their artistic merit, for

¹⁰ Quoted from an interview with Virginia McDaniel in *League Lingo*, XIII (May, 1938), published in Sioux City, Iowa.

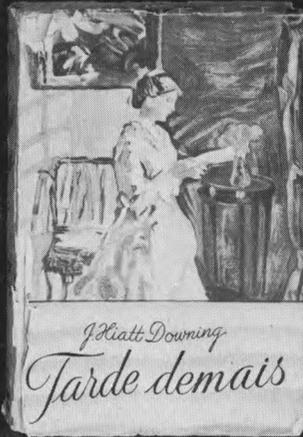
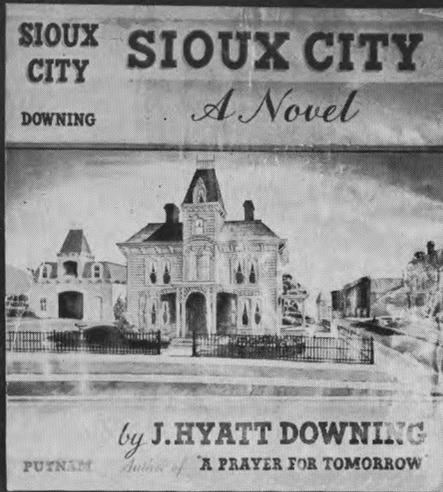
these were the drought years in the Downing literary chronicle. "Rejections will prove that writing isn't all beer and skittles," he wrote on one unpublished story that had been sent to fifteen different magazines. Over another he wrote: "I always intended to redo this piece—but never did. That's what happens to writers," and it was signed, "by Hyatt Downing," then in pencil, "who came to the never-never land of Hollywood." Inked over an unsuccessful feature article is the darkest realization of the hack work he was doing, "when you write bilge like this you are at the very bottom of the pit, artistically."

Yet, Hollywood held a tremendous fascination for Hyatt Downing in the people he and his wife met, and whom he interviewed. "Marge and I lived there for twenty-five years," he wrote in a letter, "and in all that time when I was doing publicity at Twentieth Century Fox studios, I never saw anyone who was bored or unhappy. The lives of actors are generally full and interesting. And contrary to the belief of most mid-westerners Hollywood people are kind and generous." Frank Fay, the original Elwood P. Dowd of "Harvey" fame, Joseph Cotton, Broderick Crawford, Gregory Peck, and June Allyson among others were just a few of the stars who were more than just acquaintances, several of them good friends.

One additional professional relationship which is represented in over forty letters in the collection is that between Mr. Downing and his agent, Harold Ober. Some of these letters are actually from other members of the Harold Ober Associates staff, but in their entirety they convey a great deal of very practical advice on professional writing. Besides specific criticisms of submitted stories, suggested cuts and reworkings, and payment accountings, there is a generous amount of moral support. "How he could pick me up and revive my fast-slipping faith in my own abilities," Mr. Downing recalls.

Hyatt Downing's last published story appeared in the *Reader's Digest* in January, 1963. Titled "Muldoon the Magnificent," the story deals with a number of incidents involving a large English bulldog on the campus of the University of South Dakota during Mr. Downing's college days. The story represents the light side of his writing at its anecdotal, humorous best, perhaps because he is writing about his early experiences. Muldoon had earlier appeared in his fourth *Scribner's* story "We Went West." In this same year, under the pseudonym Mark Flood, Mr. Downing wrote and sold to the London publisher Collins a western entitled *Four on the Trail*.

Although these two efforts mark the last published material in the Downing collection, two additional pieces deserve mention. The first



Jacket designs for three editions of J. Hyatt Downing's novel *Sioux City*. Top: the Putnam edition of 1940. Lower left: an English edition, 1941, with title altered to *They Built a City*. Lower right: a Portuguese translation published in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1943.

is an unpublished novel, at one time entitled *Garth*, about a completely ruthless insurance executive. Mr. Downing, as well as his friend Paul Jordan-Smith, a long-time editor of the book section of the *Los Angeles Times*, consider this novel to be among the very best of his works.¹¹ The other piece is a very promising story idea entitled *The Landskinners*, which deals with the large-scale wheat exploiters in South Dakota during the early twentieth century who ravaged the virgin land by leasing for short periods, planting and harvesting several crops, and leaving the land drained of its natural fertility, barren and worthless.

Since 1962 Hyatt and Marge Downing have lived a quiet life in Shell Beach, California, a pleasant little community on the Pacific coast just south of San Luis Obispo. His big raw-boned frame, only slightly bent with his eighty years, can still be seen striding determinedly along the beach road, an imposing silhouette against the dazzling white of the breaking surf. Yet it is during the few hours whiled away in swapping tales with old friends that the real vibrancy of Hyatt Downing comes to the surface. Warmed by a touch of I. W. Harper's against the lingering chill of the January sea breeze, Mr. Downing remains an engaging story teller. Many of these memories provided the background for his fiction, some are partially revealed or alluded to in the correspondence, but many remain the sole treasured experience of the individual listener. Like the Downing papers, these stories reveal a phenomenally varied and extremely rich life, filled with people and places and incidents that few men experience, and still fewer can appreciate and enjoy.

The Downing collection is the depiction of an era and the personal history of a man who in the final analysis fulfilled his artistic credo. "There is one thing," Hyatt Downing said, "that even the littlest writer can do along with the giants: he can be sincere. He can believe in his work, he can try with all his might to make it the best he has in him, he can keep faith with himself. He can lift his voice among the thousands of reedy plaints which climb to the high heaven each year from the roaring presses and say 'I told them the truth.'"

¹¹ The Library has recently received the manuscript of *Garth*. It is an interesting and noteworthy addition to the Downing literary canon and draws heavily on Mr. Downing's years in the insurance business.