

A Great American Journal Comes West

Cedar Falls' Own *North American Review*

by Maureen McCoy

The North American Review, published in Cedar Falls, Iowa, is the oldest literary magazine in the United States, and, in 1981, it shocked such newsstand giants as *Esquire* and the *Atlantic* by winning the prestigious National Magazine Award for fiction. Dr. Kenneth Lash, director of the University of Northern Iowa's humanities program and a contributing editor and columnist for the university-owned *North American Review*, said in a *Des Moines Register* interview: "It's almost unheard of for a literary magazine published by a university to win this award. I don't know if it's ever been done before. It's certainly extra-

ordinary and we're extremely thrilled."

The *North-American Review and Miscellaneous Journal*, as it was first titled, was founded in the East as were other respected journals in the early nineteenth century. A group of Harvard graduates nurtured the "Old North," as it was known, into existence in Boston in 1815. At that time, American magazines had only local circulations; the nation's publications were still essentially provincial in character. But the *Review* took a forward approach, envisioning a national audience with its high standards and the quality and variety of the subject matter it presented.

One of the *Review's* founders, William Tudor, also became its first editor. In fact, he wrote most of the articles in the magazine's first four volumes. In an early issue, a proposal in a letter to the editor sparked a minor religious controversy. The letter writer simply suggested that the customary second church service on Sunday be moved from the afternoon to the evening to avoid the heat of the day. When the *Review* published the letter, however, it was immediately condemned by Robert Walsh, the editor of the *National Gazette*, for being "lax in its religious tone." In another issue, a letter from another reader requested a list of all the plays so far produced in America. Letters and articles like these in the early volumes of the *Review* quickly established its reputation as a magazine concerned with literary matters and currents, and it is a reputation



William Tudor, Jr., the first editor of the *North American Review*.

that has continued to be the *Review's* trademark to the present day.

Poetry appeared in the *Review* as early as 1816, and by 1817 it was publishing examples of literary work that have since become well-known classics. William Cullen Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis" appeared in the *Review* in the fall of 1817 and "To A Waterfowl" appeared the next year. Interestingly enough, "Thanatopsis" had arrived on the editor's desk with neither the author's name nor a title on the work — a practice unheard of in today's competitive literary world. At this time, however, editors routinely published writers anonymously, though they were accustomed to knowing the author's identity themselves.

The editorship of the *Review* changed hands frequently during the first decade of its publication. Jared Sparks began a one-year term as editor when Tudor left the position in 1817, and a concern for American history gained a firm footing in the *Review*. In the year that followed, 1818-1819, Edward T. Channing guided the magazine's course. In 1820, when Channing accepted a Harvard professorship, the young and talented Edward Everett became editor.

Under Everett's direction the *Review* prospered. The magazine's circulation figures increased from roughly 500 in 1820, Everett's first year, to 2500 in 1822. Writers in a variety of fields contributed to the *Review*; political questions were studied for their social and economic effects, science (chemistry, geology, botany, and medicine) was given new attention, and an increased emphasis on travel books and travelers' accounts suggested an editorial Europe-mindedness. Also, the magazine presented translations of several German writers and thinkers, including Goethe.

Everett's tenure as editor ended in 1823 and he was followed, in 1824, by the return of Jared Sparks, who had earlier written to Everett complaining of a "lack of an all-American vision in the magazine." Sparks continued to increase

the *Review's* readership figures, successfully gaining new subscribers in the nation's South and West. Today, mass circulation is vital to a magazine's success, but the pursuit of a national audience was an innovation in communications in the early nineteenth century. By 1826, the magazine's circulation stood at just under 3,000, and it remained at roughly this level until the 1850s.

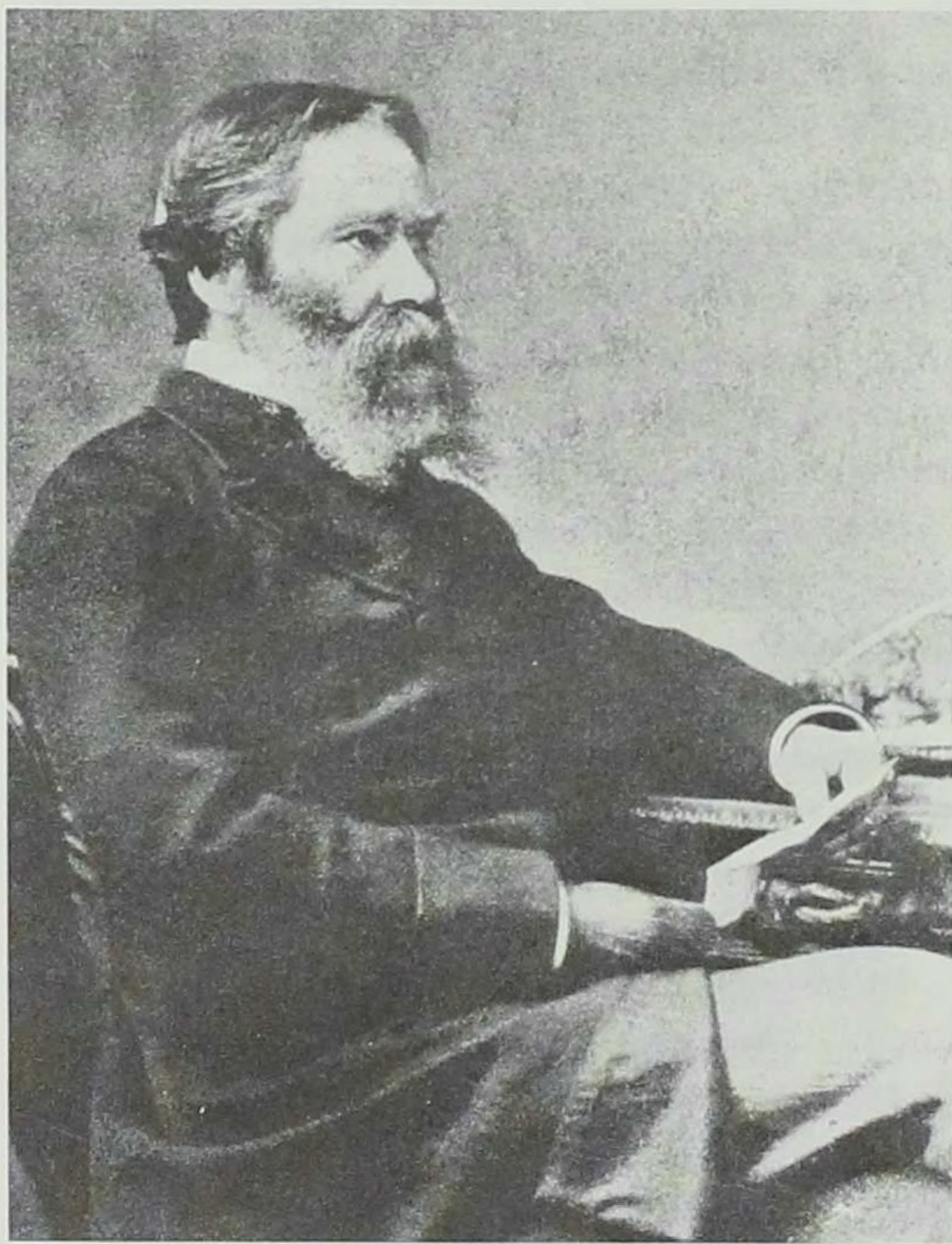
In the 1820s much of the space in the quarterly issues of the *Review* was devoted to biographical writing, which it promoted as a serious form of literary endeavor. Under Sparks' editorial guidance, the *Review* established itself as a commentator on travel, literature, history, science, political economy, and philosophy, as well as a promoter of fiction and poetry.

In hopes of obtaining high quality material for its issues, the *Review* in 1823 began to pay its authors a dollar a page for their articles. This was unheard of in magazine publishing. One contributor returned his check to the *Review* with the statement that "I must be permitted to act without any other reward than the hope to promote a most useful and important publication."

In 1830, Alexander Hill Everett, brother of Edward Everett, assumed the position of editor, and his years as editor from 1830 to 1836 proved to be a high point in the magazine's history. The new editor kept his readers abreast of American political problems and European topics. As the *Knickerbocker* magazine of New York declared in its May 1835 issue,

In every respect, the North American Review is an honor to the country. In politics, it is liberal and impartial. We hail it as the sole exponent, in its peculiar sphere, of our national mind, character, and progress; and are proud to see it sent abroad, with the Christian Examiner, as an evidence of indigenous talent, high moral worth, and republican feeling.

In the late 1830s and 1840s, however, with first



James Russell Lowell, one of the most distinguished editors of the *North American Review*.

John Gorham Palfrey and then Francis Bowen as its editors, the *Review* sank into a certain dull routine. A Harvard professor of philosophy and economics, Bowen's contributions to the *Review* were largely on philosophical topics. Bowen's approach diminished the magazine's popular appeal. In 1849 the *Boston Chronotype* referred to the *Review* as "a slow coach." In the decade of the 1850s, however, a new editor, Andrew P. Peabody, tried to spruce up the magazine to fortify it against the bright new publications that were then springing up as rivals. One welcome change was a new easier-to-read typeface for the *Review*.

The Civil War decade brought two distinguished co-editors to the *Review*: James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton. Lowell concentrated on Lincoln and on contemporary political issues during the war. After the war, the *Review* returned to its literary bent. Essays

on Rousseau, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Chaucer abounded, most of them drawn from Lowell's lecture notes. The essays laid the foundation for Lowell's reputation as a learned critic, and fostered a tradition of literary criticism in the pages of the *Review* as well. Meanwhile, the ponderous weightiness of the *Review* was lightened, as Norton saw "an opportunity . . . to make the *North American* one of the means of developing the nation, of stimulating its better sense, of holding up to its own ideal."

Other innovations also appeared. First, in 1868 the *Review* began publishing the names of its authors, a policy that some considered a "staggering blow to anonymity of writers." Second, the *Review* followed the trend of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* in the 1870s in deciding to accept advertising.

Further changes of editors occurred also. In 1868, Norton resigned to go abroad and he was replaced by E.W. Gurney, who served as co-editor with Lowell until 1870. In 1870, the *Review* added another name to its succession of distinguished editors; Henry Adams, grandson of President John Adams, replaced Gurney. Adams became the sole editor when Lowell resigned in 1872. Adams expressed a certain trepidation at editing a magazine with such a long tradition, noting that "My terror is lest it should die on my hands."

The *Review* did not die in the 1870s, but when Allen Thorndike Rice purchased the magazine in 1878 he moved it to New York and made it a free forum welcoming any and all expressions of opinion. It was to be, Rice declared, "an arena wherein any man having something valuable to say could be heard." The "Old North" had maintained a dignified and retiring quality for years; its scholarship had always been steady if sometimes ponderous. Now Rice plunged it into the "maelstrom of contemporaneity." At times the *Review* under Rice seemed almost journalistic in its chronicling of current events. Concluding that fresh

writing on lively topics would be profitable, Rice set out to invigorate the *Review's* pages with it. Controversy became the order of the day, though the *Review* itself remained politically neutral, and since the magazine paid well now, it attracted many contributors.

Francis Parkman, in his article on "The Woman Question," prayed to God to deliver America from that most reckless of experiments: the movement toward women's rights. This brought an immediate response from such feminist leaders as Julia Ward Howe, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Later, a series of discussions and essays on religious beliefs and affiliations sparked still more excitement and controversy. The issues of the *Review* included, for example, E.E. Hale's essay "Why Am I a Unitarian?" as well as essays on "Why Am I a Heathen?" by Wong Chin Foo, and "Why Am I an Agnostic?" by Robert Ingersoll. By 1888 the *Review* had diversified its opinions and its interests to the point of even presenting a lively defense of prizefighting.

In its new guise, however, literary material was still very important to the *Review*. The question of whether Sir Francis Bacon was the real author of Shakespeare's works was explored at length in its pages, and the *Review* also published a two-part autobiographical article by composer Richard Wagner. The issue of February 1881 was typical of the *Review* in this period. It included an essay on "The Pulpit and the Pew," by Oliver Wendell Holmes, speculations on "The Poetry of the Future," by Walt Whitman, and an article on the proposed Nicaraguan canal by Ulysses S. Grant.

Rice's emphasis on publishing controversial issues while maintaining the *Review's* interest in literary affairs proved very successful. Between the time when he purchased the *Review* in 1878 and his death in 1889, Rice saw the magazine's circulation figures rise from 7,500 to 17,000. As a result, when Lloyd Bryce took over after Rice's death he pursued the same general policies. Under Bryce, the *Review*

published debates between the English Prime Minister William E. Gladstone and the Duke of Argyll on the question of home rule for Ireland, as well as articles on the American labor movement, the free silver issue, Catholicism, immigration, and the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands.

But Bryce also began to publish clever and sophisticated essays on contemporary social life, manners, friends, servant problems, courtship, and sports. In the 1890s Mark Twain emerged as a valued contributor. His remarks might be serious, as in "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences," or anecdotal, as in his "Private History of the 'Jumping Frog' Story." In his "Private History" Twain recounted his discovery of an ancient Greek legend that was nearly identical to his short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." His conclusion was that no plagiarism had occurred; imagination had simply made a froglike leap of several thousand years. Articles like these caused the *Review's* circulation to rise to a peak of 76,000 by 1891.

Colonel George Harvey purchased the *Review* in 1899. He sought to give it a more international outlook. The Boer War, which was then running its bloody course in South Africa, became a favorite topic of discussion. Under Colonel Harvey the *Review's* list of contributors expanded to include such international figures as Leo Tolstoy, Maurice Maeterlinck, and H.G. Wells. A "World-Politics" department, begun in 1904, regularly solicited correspondence from the major European capitals.

In these years, too, politics and literature often mixed in the pages of the *Review*. Mark Twain's essay "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" was a bitter condemnation of what men called "civilization." Henry James' novel *The Ambassadors* was first serialized in the *Review*. Critics concluded that the work was not a popular one, but that it certainly belonged in the *Review*. One said of James that "He has come

to his own and his own has taken him in."

Under Colonel Harvey, the *Review* abandoned its traditional political neutrality. In 1904 the magazine spoke out in favor of Theodore Roosevelt, only to turn against him in 1906, when it published an article titled "Whom Will the Democrats Next Nominate for President?" Author Mayo Hazeltine's prophetic answer was Woodrow Wilson. When Wilson eventually gained the Democratic nomination in 1912, two magazines, the *North American Review* and *Harper's Weekly*, were credited with having given him the nationwide popularity that delivered him the nomination.

In 1913 Harvey began the custom of making the first article in each issue an editorial pronouncement. He used this column to oppose American entry into World War I and then, after the war, American participation in the League of Nations. Significantly, Alan Seeger's poem, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," the forebodings of a soldier in the trenches, saw publication in the *Review* in 1916.

Throughout these years, the *Review's* circulation figures were declining. From a peak of 76,000 in 1891, the figure fell to 25,000 by 1910 and 13,000 by 1924, when Colonel Harvey took the *Review* off the newsstands and turned it into a quarterly.

Harvey finally sold the *Review* in 1926 to Walter Butler Mahony. The new owner and editor modernized the magazine's appearance and published a wide range of articles on social, economic, political, literary, and artistic topics, and rounded out each issue with a few short stories. Though he included well-known authors as his contributors, Mahony specifically sought out new and varied talent to bring fresh viewpoints to the magazine's pages. In 1935 Mahony turned over the editorial chair to John H.G. Pell, and Pell in turn sold the *Review* to Joseph Hilton Smyth in 1939.

It was under Smyth's editorship that the *Review* became involved in a scandal that eventually led to its suspension. Smyth pleaded

guilty to having served, along with his associates, as an agent for the Japanese government without registering with the State Department as a foreign agent. This scandal severely damaged the reputation of the *Review*, and it ceased publication in 1940.

Between its founding in 1815 and its suspension in 1940 the *North American Review* went through a vast number of changes. Though Jared Sparks had sought to give it an "all-American vision" in his years as its editor, the magazine had remained provincial, with close ties to Boston and Harvard. Sometimes, too, the scholarly works the *Review* published were quite dull. Nevertheless Sparks, the Everetts, and other editors did increase circulation over the years. The brilliance of Lowell, Norton, and Adams was followed by the editorship of Allen Thorndike Rice under whom the *Review* became a scintillating, lively journal filled with clashing political, religious, and scientific opinions while still remaining a literary magazine. Under Colonel Harvey's long editorship it became distinguished for its political influence and its international outlook.

In these early days of American magazine publication, the *North American Review* and other national publications succeeded in changing and enhancing the nature of communication across the country. The *Review* vigorously educated the public in the nation's cultural heritage, interpreted and put in perspective the world's larger issues, and provided low-cost entertainment in the bargain. During the Progressive Era, the magazine was also responsible in part for a number of social and political reforms. Most importantly, the *Review* and other early national magazines fostered a sense of national community among its readers, a new development in the evolution of the country. Readers knew, however vaguely, that the people across the country who seemed so inaccessible and distant were reading the same things they were, and were seeing the same issues. When the *Review* suspended pub-

lication in 1940, this influence seemed to have come to an end.

But in March 1964 the *North American Review* was revived at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, by poet and teacher Robert Dana, who continued to teach full-time throughout his editorship. In the first issue of the revived magazine, Dana and his editorial staff wrote that "The present publisher and editors guarantee to strive to return the North American Review to its position 'as the highest and most impartial platform upon which current issues can be discussed.' If we die, it will be with open minds in honest poverty." They went on to say that they hoped to establish a new kind of magazine. There already were general mass circulation magazines, little magazines, and special-interest periodicals, but the *Review*, they said,

wants to be the fourth kind of journal, a kind we see as non-existent in America in the 1960's. We want to be an arena for world issues. We want to print good writing and good thinking and to present it to the widest possible audience. The hope is pious. We are not the first ones to express it. But we have a few things working for us: a good name, that of the most distinguished magazine in America's history; we pay contributors – and not badly, at that; we operate, with an unpaid staff, on practically no overhead; we have taste and judgment; we are not isolated from what is going on in the world today; we can sense what people of intelligence and good will will listen to, what will move them.

We have no axe to grind, no editorial policy to follow except excellence. We have an anarchist working for the staff, and we have a Goldwater man; we have agnostics and we have Episcopalians.

Our first issue is not what we would like to be, but it points in the right direction. We don't have jargon – sociological, theo-

logical, literary-critical, or any other kind – we don't have obscurity, we don't have sensationalism. We also don't have advertising, but we've got to get some if we're going to survive.

With this as a statement of goals and intentions, the first issue of the *Review* from Cornell College got off to an auspicious literary and social start. Distinguished contributors included poets Marvin Bell and Philip Levine, poet and fiction writer Robert Penn Warren, and journalist Frank Luther Mott. Also included were two articles by Roswell Garst, a Coon Rapids, Iowa, farmer who had visited the Soviet Union with a group of American farmers and whom Nikita Khrushchev visited in Iowa in 1959.



Robert Dana, who brought the *North American Review* back to life at Cornell College. (Cornell College)

Garst recounted his experiences with the Russian dignitaries and his observations on the differences in farming techniques between the two nations. The first issue of the *Review* also included literary reviews, and a photo essay by an Iowa photographer, Joan Liffing.

True to its earlier tradition, the *Review* maintained an interest in politics along with its literary interests. In the January 1968 issue, for example, the poet Denise Levertov discussed the Pentagon march and sit-in of the previous October. The March-April issue speculated as to whether Ronald Reagan, who was then the newly elected governor of California, would be the new Republican messiah, a speculation that was reminiscent of the 1906 article promoting Woodrow Wilson as a Democratic candidate.

Continuing the policy established by editor Walter Butler Mahony in 1926, the revitalized *North American Review* of the 1960s stated firmly that it would especially seek submissions from lesser-known writers. In 1968 the *Review* devoted one of its issues solely to fiction and another to poetry. In spite of Dana's determination, however, the *Review* did not remain permanently at Cornell College. In his last issue of 1968, Dana included an editorial entitled "The Last Hurrah." In it, he wrote:

We are very late with NAR this time; sorry about that. But this is the last issue which will appear under my editorship. At present, we are negotiating the sale of the magazine to the University of Northern Iowa (Cedar Falls). When the sale goes through, NAR will continue unbroken the publishing record it refloated in 1964.

It has been NAR's policy to keep editorials to a minimum, preferring to save the space for the knowledgeable and articulate — those writers more truly, somehow, the psychic barometers of that important weather that shapes up west of New York. This policy notwithstanding, however, the occasion seems to demand

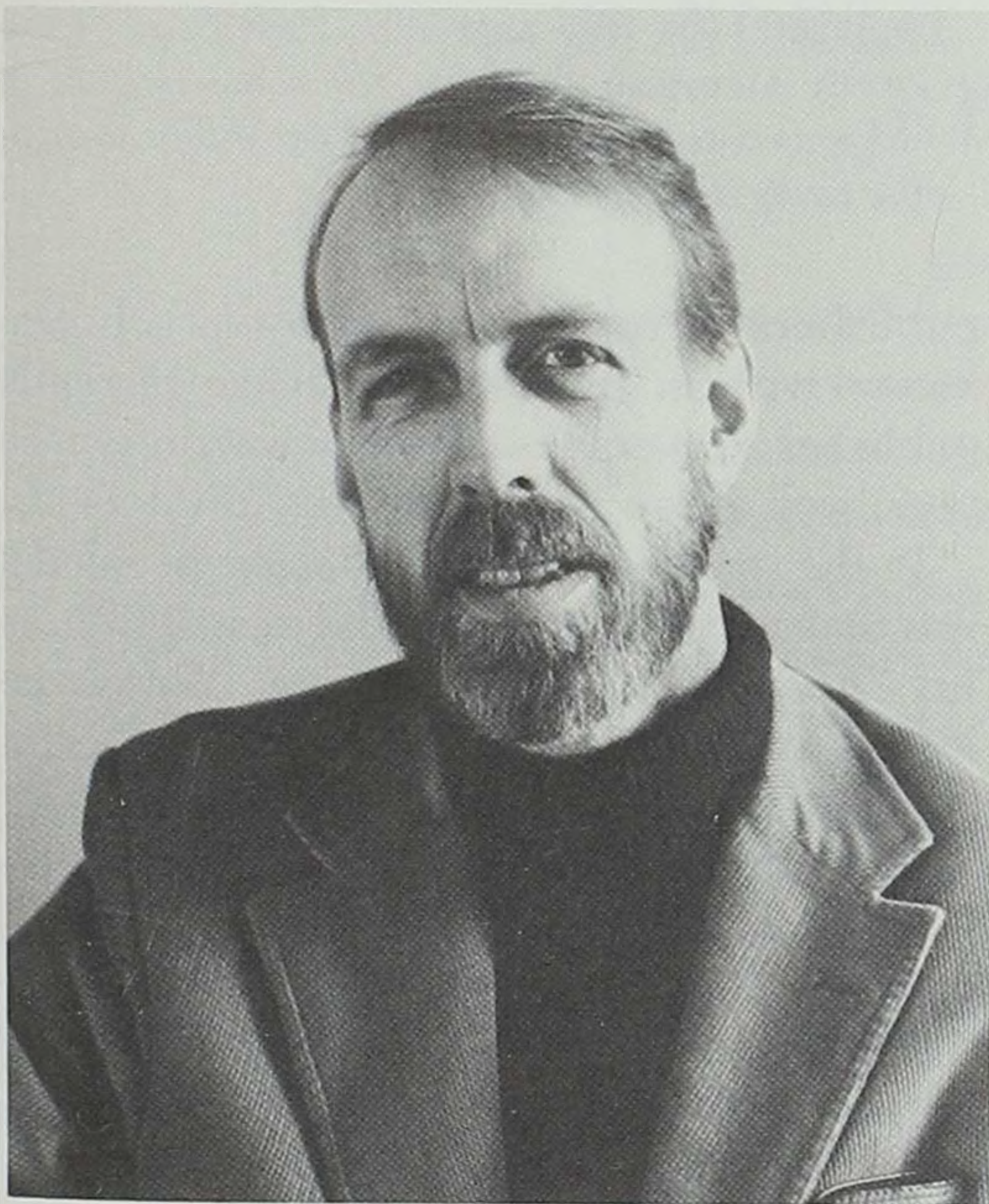
some comment on the part of the present editor, though it's difficult to determine what's appropriate.

One might be expected to sip the bitter salts of defeat, I suppose. But the sale of The North American Review cannot be considered a defeat. Its five-year life at Cornell has been something of a miracle really, like living with a transplanted heart. We have always known that the rejection syndrome might wipe us out at any moment. So what? The magazine ran on a budget that never reached \$6000 a year. Staff members all worked full-time at something else and were never paid for their work on NAR. We were kept alive by the loyalty of our staff, our contributors, and our ever-renewing libraries. NAR's circulation equaled that of many more established magazines, and in less time. It rarely sank to being clubby or urbanely provincial. It had a toothy candor we like to think was unique among magazines sporting a slick cover. Yet it was never slick in its approach to important issues. Too, we discovered a lot of new talent in the meadows of fiction and poetry, and the off-streets of journalism.

Dana closed with a list of the many people who had helped to publish the *Review* under his editorship.

Although the magazine had to be sold, Dana insisted that it be kept west of the Mississippi in an effort to entrench the historically important magazine in the heartland. The University of Iowa considered purchasing the *Review*, but eventually it ended up in another obscure Iowa outpost — Cedar Falls.

When the *Review* was purchased by the University of Northern Iowa, its new editor was Robley Wilson, Jr., who taught — and still teaches — creative writing at the university. Wilson devoted his first "Smalltalk" column to a discussion of his reasons for optimism about the *Review's* future:



Robley Wilson, Jr., the current editor of the *North American Review*. (courtesy Robley Wilson, Jr., of the *North American Review*)

It should be remarked that the New Management takes up its work with a feeling of gorgeous optimism — as if simply to gather together an assortment of gaunt, coffee-drinking, cigarette-smoking, or otherwise high-strung types, were in itself a promise of sound journalism and high-class literature. Real though that promise may turn out to be, the roots of our optimism reach far deeper.

First, The North American Review is a proud old name; you may trace it back in a direct, once-broken line more than 150 years, and it is our belief that in the five years since its revival the Review has come far toward recovering and improving the lustre of its best past.

Second, we begin our tenure with a solid base of nearly a thousand subscribers — and because most of these are libraries (in all 50 states, and in eleven foreign

countries), we probably have a good many more readers than the bare circulation figures might suggest.

Finally, we are embarked on a curious kind of adventure. No other quarterly with the Review's particular aspirations (at least, none we can think of) enjoys the protection and support of a public university. Ponder that. Northern Iowa is the rawest of universities, scarcely out of its teacher's college cocoon, located nearly a hundred miles west of the little old lady in Dubuque. If the Review during the years to come succeeds in threading its way between our obligations to the state of Iowa and our obligations to a national readership, . . . then who can say that the Enlightenment is not at hand?

All contrary portents aside, we intend to flourish.

Under Robley Wilson the *Review* has indeed reveled in its status as the only literary magazine owned by a public university. Unlike the editors of the quarterlies and reviews published by other universities, Wilson reported in an interview with the poetry newsletter *Coda* that his position as the editor of the *Review* is acknowledged through a salary and a specific allotment of time. He is able to work steadily as the editor of the *Review*, not simply as an editor "on the side" as many professors responsible for editing university literary publications must be.

In its time at Cedar Falls, the *Review* has continued the tradition of dividing its attention between literary works and articles on national and world affairs. The magazine's concern for social and political issues found expression in the first issue in a sketch of the situation in Nigeria and an article on Indian-white relations first published in the *Review* ninety years earlier. The article, "An Indian's View of Indian Affairs," by Young Joseph, a Nez Perce Indian, presented an eloquent and disturbing account of the tribe's manipulation and subjugation by

whites. Wilson expanded this concern in the winter 1973-74 issue, reprinting twenty articles on Indian-white relations drawn from issues of the *Review* over the previous 150 years. In the second issue, columnist Donald Kaul made his debut as a commentator on one of his favorite topics: the Nixon presidency. Later issues contained discussions of the urban crisis, various environmental issues, the separatist movement in Quebec, and the Vietnam Conflict.

With its literary emphasis, the *Review* continues to divide its space between established writers and new and lesser-known authors. The *Review's* Cedar Falls issues included works by Donald Justice and Vance Bourjaily, who were at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The *Review* also drew on the workshop for an unpublished story by Flannery O'Connor entitled "Wildcat." O'Connor had written it as part of her work toward a master of fine arts degree at the workshop in 1947. Closer to home, the *Review* devoted its fall 1974 issue to poet James Hearst, a Cedar Falls resident whose published poetry stretches back to the 1930s.

One vehicle that Wilson has used to publicize the works of new authors is to devote issues of the *Review* to a special topic. The summer 1970 issue, for example, printed stories by eight women under the umbrella heading of "a woman's place is at the typewriter." Other topical *Review* issues have included titles like "Long Live the Short Story," "The Great American Love Story," and "Growing Up Woman."

With these policies, the *North American Review* under Robley Wilson's editorship has gained an ever growing reputation in the publishing field. The most prominent evidence of this reputation is its receipt of the National Magazine Award for fiction in 1981. In receiving this award, the *Review* joined the ranks of such nationally prominent magazines as the *Atlantic*, *Esquire*, and the *Saturday Review* as

Opposite: the title page of a 1905 issue of the *North American Review*. *The wide variety of subjects covered was typical of the publication in the early days of this century.*

publishers of quality fiction by largely unknown writers. In fact, the *Review* currently publishes an average of thirty new writers each year, well above its competitors in the field.

In the spring of 1980, the *Review* decided it was time to celebrate a birthday — its 165th. In his "About This Issue" column, Wilson informed his readers that

There's nothing especially symmetrical about the number 165, but we like to think that when you get to be as old as The North American Review — "the Old North," as she used to be known — you can celebrate a birthday any time you feel like it. Well, we feel like it; it's been a mild but drab winter, the great powers of the world are acting as if life on this planet were a cheap commodity, and spring can't come fast enough to rescue us all. Here-with: our 165th Anniversary number.

Maybe the Old North should have birthday parties more often. With a publishing record that stretches back to 1815 in the nation and to 1964 in Iowa, and with a reputation for excellence in both literary works and discussions of social and political issues, this Iowa magazine has certainly earned the right to have as many birthday parties as it wants. □

Note on Sources

The back issues of the *North American Review* provided the most ready source of information for this article. Especially important for putting the early years of the magazine's history into perspective was F.L. Mott's 1935 article, "One Hundred and Twenty Years." For the years since the *Review's* 1964 revival, the editors' columns were valuable. Also helpful was the willingness of the current *North American Review* editor, Robley Wilson, Jr. to discuss the modern history of the *Review* with both the author and the current *Palimpsest* editor.