

James Norman Hall's

My Island Home:

An Overdue Review

by Raymond A. Smith, Jr.

There are a number of books which contain descriptions of life in Iowa at various times in the historical past. Many of the authors of such books have dealt with Iowa in passing or peripheral fashion, however. One such work was written by Emily Post in 1915. It was entitled *By Motor to the Golden Gate* and in seven of its middle chapters the author described the Iowa portion of her trip. It was a story filled with mud, punctured tires, a bakers' convention in Cedar Rapids, and booster headlines on Des Moines newspapers. It is an obvious period piece but it can be read by Iowans with historical profit as well as pleasure.

Travel books should always be culled for those magnificently prejudiced bits of writing about locales through which an outsider traveled. In similar fashion, biographies and autobiographies should be consulted for the passages which deal with whatever portion of the subject's life was spent in an area of one's interest. A worthwhile example of this kind of literature which concerns Iowa is James Norman Hall's *My Island Home*.

James Norman Hall was an Iowan by birth, upbringing, education, and even temperament. The fact that he became a wanderer

has led some to believe that he spurned the state in his writings. Since he preferred to live on a Pacific island some people even refuse to consider him as an Iowa writer. Be that as it may, there are good reasons for reading (or rereading) James Norman Hall's *My Island Home*. First, the book is a superb autobiography by an Iowan who was a talented, sensitive, modest, and very private person. Though he had not completed the book at the time of his death, it is a most worthwhile effort even in partial form. Secondly, it is a very idealistic work by a very idealistic man. And there are at least two times in one's life to read idealistic literature: when one is very young and knows that such works contain great truths and have great value; and, when one is a bit older and wants desperately to believe that such works contain great truths and have great value. Another reason is that *My Island Home* is a book about the first half of the twentieth century, a time which is fast receding from the national memory.

Finally, Hall's autobiography is a book about Iowa. Only in the last third of the volume does Hall finally arrive in the South Seas. The focus in the volume is clearly on all the things that

transpired in the life of James Norman Hall prior to his arrival in Tahiti. It is a book about growing up in Colfax, Iowa. It is a book about the Skunk River, railroads, books, a ten-year old poet, attitudes of pre-World War I America, and about Milton, Coleridge, and Burns. It is a good book for people who spent their early years in Iowa especially if those early years came sometime in the first half of this century.

Born in 1887, James Norman Hall grew up in a world in which the romance of the railroads was still a part of one's life. His accounts of nocturnal visits to points along the Rock Island line near Colfax remind one that there was a time when railroads in great number put trains on the tracks of the state in even greater number. Changing conditions have noticeably altered our notions of what is and what is not romantic. Is it possible to be nostalgic about either of the Amtrak trains which presently cross Iowa?

Growing up in Colfax, Hall was not denied culture. There was the culture of books and his recollections of his mother reading Dickens and Cooper and other volumes flow naturally into recollections of his own reading of Milton and Coleridge at an early age. He commented at length on Burns, whose verses became a kind of model for him as a pre-teen poet, or the "Woodshed Poet" as he called himself. Hall wished to become the "Hawkeye Poet" but he settled for the more modest and self-proclaimed title. And, admittedly, being a poet of quasi-romantic inclinations when one lived on the Skunk River was difficult. Other people have felt similarly about trying to deal poetically with the Nishnabotna River or with Pottawattamie County. One has to admit that even the best of Iowa place-names can set the creative individual back on his heels.

How strange the world of James Norman Hall's boyhood seems today. He described a time when "war was no threat of the future but a fading memory of the past." He

talked of the "deep tranquility of 1899." He described glee clubs in torchlight processions at Grinnell in an era when music or song was much more a part of one's life than perhaps has been the case in more recent years. Hall ultimately became a nostalgic conservative and, as such, was thoroughly representative of a kind of Iowa thinking with which we are all familiar. He described the Skunk as a river which meandered and bent and looped and he decried the changes which occurred over time to turn it into little more than a ditch. At one point in his autobiography he wrote, "My belief is that Mother Earth knows best how her rivers should flow."

Hall was at his nostalgic best, however, when he described the joys of smoking past as compared with the joys of smoking present. His employer in the Colfax clothing store where he worked for a short time after graduating from high school was a man who enjoyed his cigars in pure fashion. His enjoyment led Hall to delight in watching him prepare and then light and smoke a cigar. He contrasted the experience with watching the nervous and frenetic manner in which his contemporaries in later life filled ashtrays with half-smoked and "mangled" cigarettes.

Hall's nostalgic conservatism was apparent in his attitudes toward the world as he found it when he returned from the First World War. He did not care for the boosters and forward-lookers; he was not at all keen about the impact of the motorcar, particularly as more and more roads were cut through the Iowa countryside. He stated at one point that he wasn't against change but he preferred a measured approach to change. "I love change only in its aspect of slow and cautious advancement and slow and imperceptible decay. And I dislike change in manners, customs and habits of thought as much as I do in material aspects." It is the kind of statement which would have been worthy of Edmund Burke. Moreover, Hall believed what many Iowans would come to feel — the

continent had been developed at a cost far too high in terms of sheer ruin. He eventually explained his expatriation on the basis of his conservatism.

But before taking up life in the South Seas, Hall had fought in the Great War, and before that, he had worked in Boston after having graduated from Grinnell College. Hall's descriptions of his years at Grinnell, from those first night visits by train when he was but an adventurous boy through that momentous autumn visit when he and his young traveling companions witnessed the glee club on parade through his years as a student and on to those occasional visits to the campus as an alumnus, culminated in a description of his last visit to the campus in 1950. On that occasion, the fortieth anniversary of his graduation, he received an honorary degree. *My Island Home* ends literally in Colfax on the eve of the reunion and the conferring of the degree. But in all of the passages in the book in which he wrote of Grinnell there is a revealing warmth to the prose. Grinnell did for James Norman Hall what a liberal arts college should do for its students. It was well summed up by Professor Stoops, head of the philosophy department, in a conversation which Hall once inadvertently overheard. Professor Stoops and another professor were discussing the future of liberal arts colleges such as Grinnell. Stoops' companion was pessimistic in the extreme, but the professor answered him by suggesting that such institutions would last as long as they adhered to their "long-range purpose. . . And that is to teach young men and women that the bird in the bush is worth two in the hand."

There are a number of similarly nice touches in Hall's accounts of his Grinnell years. He wrote, for example at one point, "A young man who has never imitated Walt Whitman has missed one of the joys of youth." Or he described how he came across the poetry of Francis Thompson when two volumes of his

works were given to him as a tip by a gentleman at the Bristol House where Hall worked as a student waiter. It was Thompson's poetry that struck the chord which convinced Hall that he would henceforth be a wanderer. Hall, the young poet, seemed to be almost incapable of coming to terms with the prosaic life of his times.

Before Grinnell he worked in a clothing store in Colfax and had so much impressed his employer that he had been offered a store to manage in South Dakota. He rejected that prospect to continue his education and "to hold to the Muse." Upon graduation from Grinnell, he went east to Boston to become a social worker. During one college summer, he took work at the University of Chicago and there discovered slums. In Boston he discovered poverty, more slums, and social classes. Classes, he later pointed out, had not been readily apparent in Colfax, Iowa. While employed by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Hall handled a number of cases, published a poem or two or three, and was gently seduced by a lady whom he described as "a Benevolent Individual" although she herself termed her motives "not wholly benevolent."

One might comment at this point upon the sensitive and very private nature of Hall as evidenced in his autobiography. Sex, in any real sense, crept into the autobiography only twice. In the first instance there was the magnificent realization that came to Hall at the Bristol House that he was actually waiting tables in a bawdy house. He was trying to figure out why the numbers of waitresses and traveling men seemed to increase so noticeably over the weekends when a fellow student who had worked at the establishment for a year longer than Hall explained the situation to him. Hall wrote, "I was astonished, and with reason, for a more modest-seeming, decent set of elderly girls, insofar as their general behavior and their attitude toward us student waiters

were concerned, could scarcely have been found." Hall's entire chapter on the Bristol House deserves to be anthologized. The two major figures in the chapter, Grandma Ridder and a potato-peeler named Addie, were masterfully sketched in quasi-humorous yet quasi-heroic fashion.

The second instance of creeping sex was the seduction scene mentioned earlier, which was done so gently and inoffensively as to remind one of that collection of poems by Samuel Hoffenstein, "Poems of Passion Carefully Restrained So as to Offend Nobody." Beyond that point Hall did not literarily stray. The privacy of the man was not marred by any autobiographical detail concerning his wife or his family except in those comments near the volume's end when he talked a bit about his daughter's family in Hawaii and his son who graduated from U.S.C. at the time Hall received his honorary degree from Grinnell.

In April 1914 Hall left his position in Boston with the M.S.P.C.C. and journeyed home to Colfax before departing for England with a little money and the hope that he could avoid either returning to Boston or going into teaching. He was in England for only a short time when the whirlwind summer of 1914 moved from the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand to the "blank cheque" to the mobilizations and war. James Norman Hall thus had a reason for not going home for, if he didn't have a professional goal of some kind, he had found a cause. Having at first admitted to the recruiting people that he was an American, he then uttered a small lie about actually being an Englishman and he was soon in the Royal Fusiliers. He was to be a part of Kitchener's Mob and his experiences in England and France in 1914 and 1915 formed the basis for his first full literary effort which was appropriately entitled *Kitchener's Mob*. The book resulted from the fact that when his unit was sent back home to England on leave, Hall

asked whether it would be possible to go on leave to the United States (and Iowa). He was offered a discharge and told that when he had had enough leave he could always return, reenlist and rejoin his old unit. He took his discharge, went home, wrote the book, puzzled over whether to return, and ultimately did return but not to his old unit.

If James Norman Hall's military record in the Great War was distinctive, it was because he served under three different flags in the course of that conflict. Initially, he was a part of the British Expeditionary Force. He later enlisted in the French Foreign Legion so that he could fly in the Escadrille Lafayette. And, when given the opportunity to transfer to a U.S. military unit when this country entered the war, he joined the United States Air Service. Hall experienced the worst of trench life, flew with such as Raoul Lufbery and other American volunteers in the French service, and finally flew with Eddie Rickenbacker in the 94th Squadron. He knew what it was to live in the trenches, to score victories in the air, and he learned what it felt like to be shot down and taken prisoner. He entered the war an idealist and he was, in a sense, still an idealist at its conclusion, however much his idealism had been tempered by bitter experiences. As he wrote of the war's end, "I doubt whether, in all European history, there had ever before been a time when the hearts of men were so filled with serene hope for the future." Unfortunately the feelings did not last long.

In the immediate postwar days Hall met the man with whom he would collaborate for more than twenty years. The man was Charles Nordhoff. Their first joint authorship effort produced a history of the Lafayette Flying Corps.

Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall are perhaps the most intriguing literary collaborators of the twentieth century. They began by doing a travel book which allowed them not only to go to the South Seas but to

remain there. The book, *Faery Lands of the South Seas*, was published in 1921. The pair did not publish another book under joint authorship until 1929 when *Falcons of France* appeared. In 1932 they scored their greatest literary triumph. After years of meticulous research and a skillful blending of writing chores, they completed *Mutiny on the Bounty*. It was a story which had not been told in any complete fashion in over 100 years and it was an adventure story *par excellence*. Because of Nordhoff and Hall, because of the masterful acting of Charles Laughton, Clark Gable, and Franchot Tone in the roles of Captain Bligh, Mr. Christian, and Mr. Byam in the 1935 film of the book, and because of the inherent qualities of the mutiny itself, an American generation and more became intimately acquainted with the HMS *Bounty*, its officers and crew, and their various fates. Nordhoff and Hall eventually filled out the story with two other books, *Men Against the Sea*, and *Pitcairn's Island*, which, together with *Mutiny on the Bounty*, form the *Bounty Trilogy* which still remains good reading for the young, the idealistic, and the adventurous. If one chooses to read them, add enough time to the commitment to include one other fine collaborative effort of Nordhoff and Hall, *The Hurricane*.

With the great success of their works published in the thirties, Nordhoff and Hall became, for their publishers, "the boys in the South Seas" who helped them through the

Depression years, and for their readers they became writers of exquisite adventure tales involving the sea. But during these years James Norman Hall lost any public understanding of the fact that he was still a man with deep roots in the Midwest. He became less an Iowan for many, and yet, with the publication of *My Island Home* in 1952, it became clear that he was one of the many Iowans who had wandered but had not strayed. It wasn't simply that he had wandered to the South Seas. He had also wandered to such places as Iceland and Spain long after he had virtually settled in Tahiti. But Tahiti was his island home and he found there what he could no longer find in Iowa or elsewhere in the United States. He found a tempo of change which was slower and more to his liking than he could find elsewhere. He found an enjoyment of life and what life could give. Even with all of that, however, he was forced to admit in a conversation with Nordhoff that his roots were still in the United States, "in the prairie country of the Middle West."

To those people who have wandered from Iowa themselves, who have found the gentle tug of home pulling on them, who have gone back to find that Iowa is the one place to which they must return at least occasionally, James Norman Hall left words which will ring true and feelings which can easily be recognized. No fitter conclusion to a review of *My Island Home* could be found than a short paragraph from the book itself:

As the westbound local crossed the Mississippi into Iowa I had an immediate sense of an altered Spirit of Place. Ever since my Chicago summer the influence of that city seemed to spread westward across Illinois until it reached the Mississippi and there the rivers halts it. "Thus far but no farther," it says. To this day I am a kind of Tam o'Shanter, not feeling safe until the train has crossed the bridge to the Iowa side; then I leaned back

Note on Sources

The basic source for this review (overdue or not) is James Norman Hall, *My Island Home: An Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952). Use was also made of James Norman Hall, *Kitchener's Mob: The Adventures of an American in Kitchener's Army* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), Nordhoff and Hall's *The Bounty Trilogy* and *The Hurricane*. One might also consult Ellery Sedgwick, *The Happy Profession* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), or Edward Weeks, *In Friendly Candor* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959). Robert Roulston, *James Norman Hall* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) is a compact but interesting biography of Hall. All quotations in the review were taken from *My Island Home*.