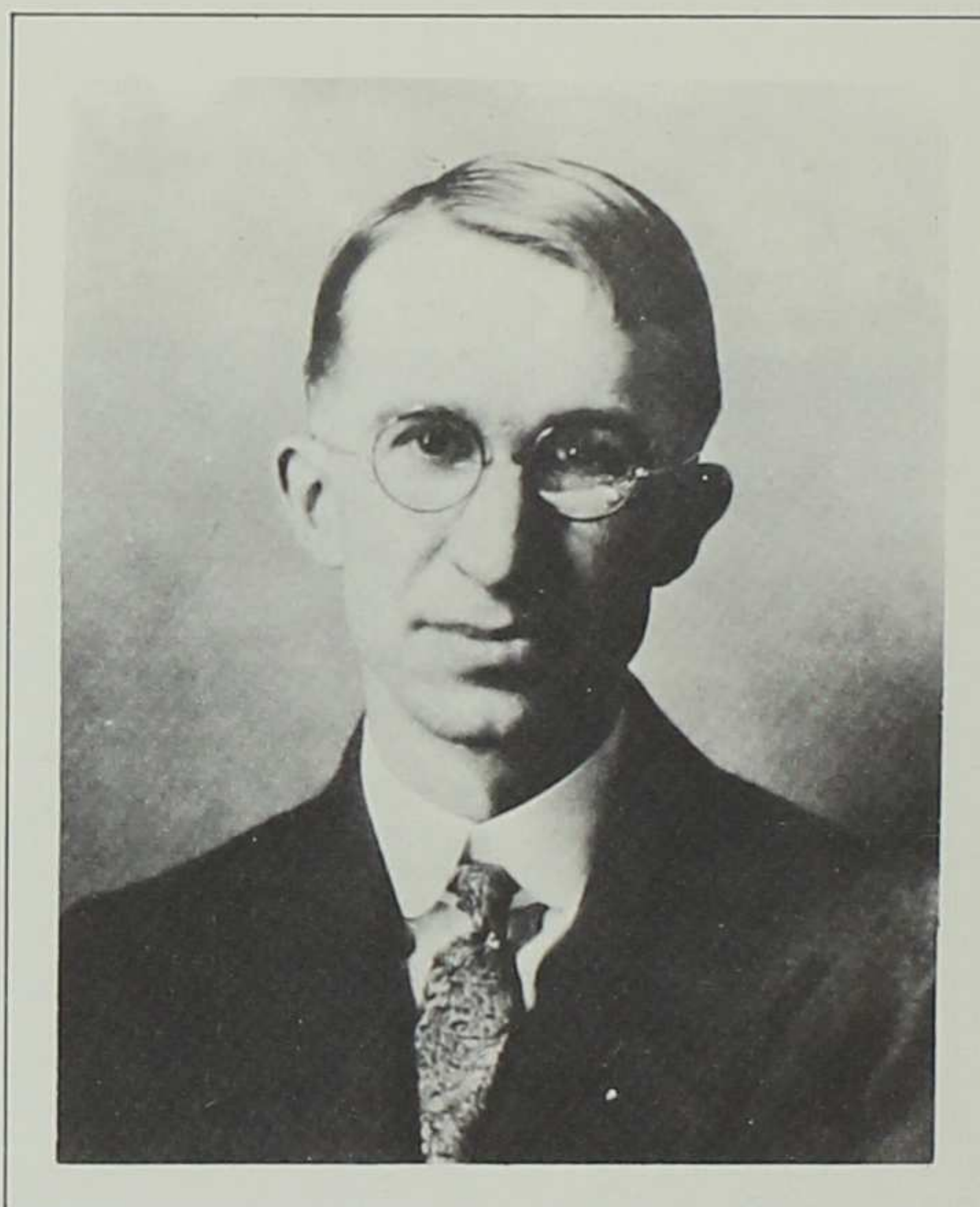


John T. Frederick

by

Milton M. Reigelman



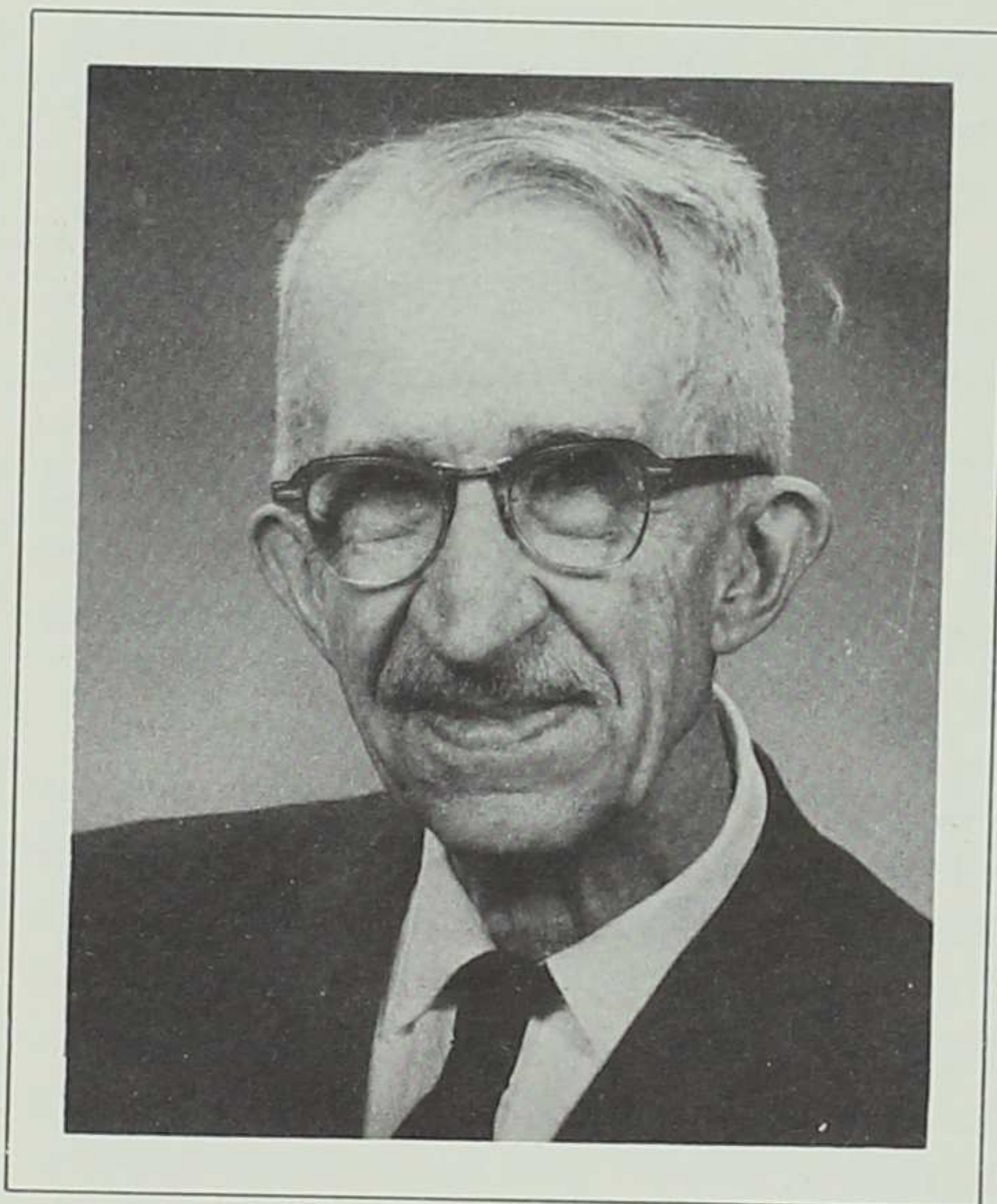
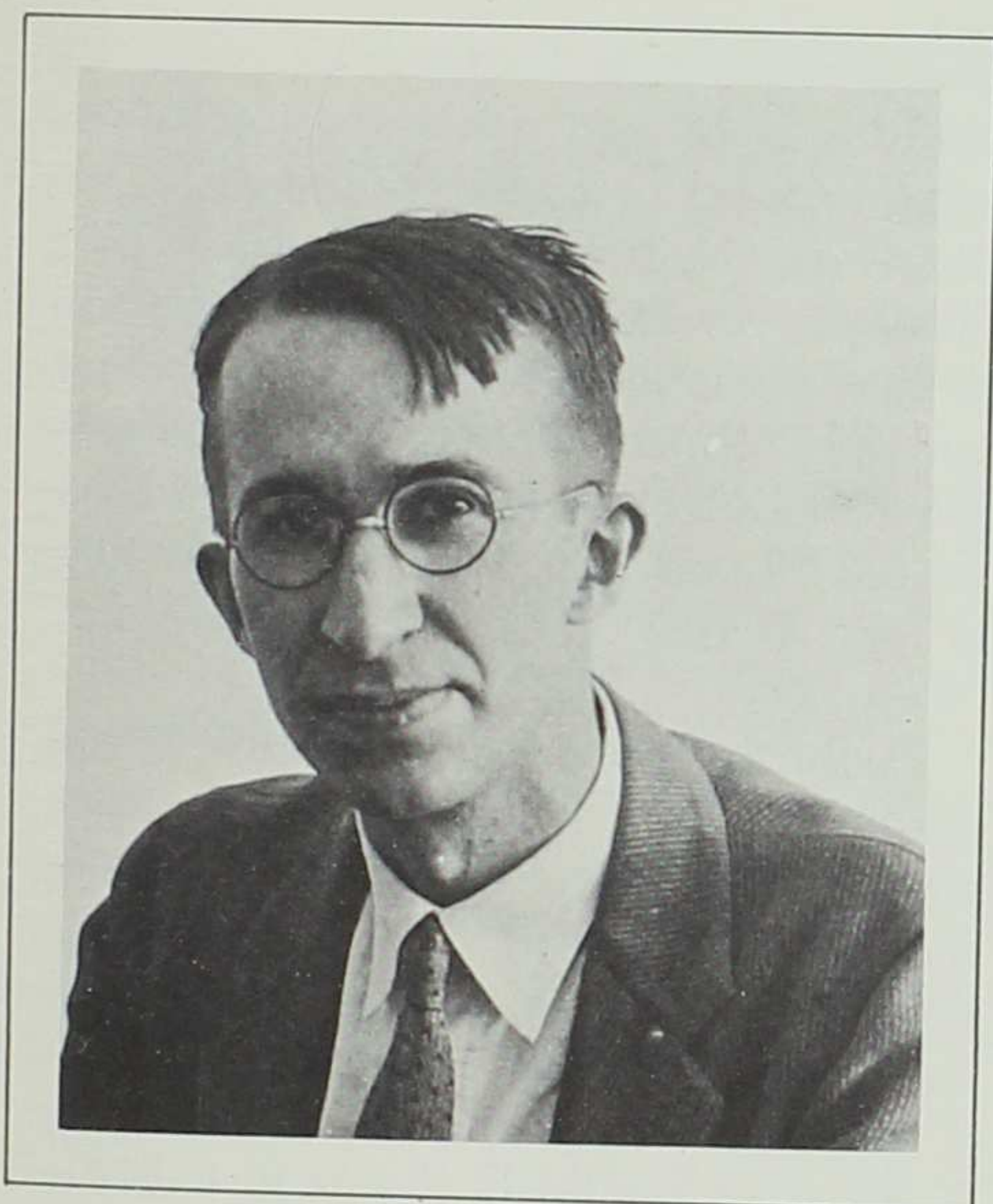
John T. Frederick

When John T. Frederick died in Iowa City on January 31, 1975, the day before his 82nd birthday, one could find the various "facts" of his life in the newspaper obituaries: he was born in Adams County, Iowa in 1893; he founded and edited from 1915-33 *The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West*; he was a distinguished novelist and critic; he conducted the popular CBS radio program "Of Books and Men" during the 1930s and '40s; he set what is probably a record for lengthy and diverse teaching career; etc. These bits of information help to define John T. Frederick, but they do not indicate probably the most important thing about him: for many people, he came to symbolize what is best about the Iowa (and, by extension, the Midwestern) character.

Frederick himself always warned beginning fiction writers to develop their

"settings" fully since, as he said, characters are related to their environment; personality is influenced by landscape. In 1925 when he was trying to define what it was that made the Southwest Iowa countryside where he grew up so distinctive, he quoted his friend, the Iowa writer Ruth Suckow: "Iowa's beauty does not stick out ostentatiously. It is fused...it is not ornament but an inherent element. It does not impose itself, but forms a background and foundation." As with this landscape, so with Frederick himself. In spite of his formidable accomplishments stretching back to the early years of the century, he was never ostentatious, never "ornamental." Yet for three generations his soft-spoken, unpretentious "grandness"--again, like the countryside--came to inspire.

Few Iowans have been so fruitful over such a long period of time. In 1962, at the age of 69, Frederick "retired" as head



of the English department at the University of Notre Dame and returned to his second wife's family farm in Iowa, the state where he had spent most of his life. (In 1960, two years after his first wife, Esther Paulus Frederick, died, he had married his sister-in-law, Lucy Paulus.) When he came back to Iowa, he did not settle into a life of retired ease, but soon had three new jobs. He helped to oversee the farm; he worked on several books and a dozen articles; and he found himself a job as Visiting Professor of English at the nearby University of Iowa where, in 1922, he had taught what was probably the first college course ever in contemporary American fiction. I first met him in 1969 when he entered a lecture room filled with 200 students. He was 76 years old and very thin. (He had always been thin.) Someone whispered, "He'll never make it to the platform." No one whispered, however, after he began to talk, without the aid of a microphone or notes,

about the falsity of seeing the experiences of David Copperfield or Anna Karenina as less "real" than our own. It was an old-fashioned, stirring lecture, partly because it depended as much on Frederick's personal experiences as it did on three-fourths of a century of wide reading and study.

Before long, the class had built up a whole mythology around Frederick, as other classes had done and would continue to do. According to one story, Frederick was actually a 23-year-old man in disguise who needed only 15 minutes sleep each night. This story gained credence after he returned 200 papers carefully graded and annotated in two-days' time. Another story had it that Frederick represented a secret, experimental breakthrough by a group of university scientists against the processes of aging. The most fascinating legend was that Frederick was a mechanical construct, a kind of early version of tele-

vision's six-million-dollar man. This legend was dismissed by most, however, because his approach to teaching was so non-mechanical and personal. He could talk warmly and personally about many of the 20th-century American short story writers the class was studying because he had actually known them, and in some cases--as I later found out--he had been partly responsible for their becoming writers in the first place.

Frederick had encouraged countless young writers through *The Midland*, the regional "little magazine" he founded in 1915, when he was a senior at the University of Iowa. At the time, publishing was becoming more and more commercialized and centralized in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, wrote his friend Edmund Wilson that he had "worked hard as hell last winter writing eleven stories to pay off \$17,000 in debts, but it was all trash and it nearly broke my heart as well as my iron constitution." Frederick, encouraged by his teachers C. F. Ansley and Edwin Ford Piper, and supported by University President Walter A. Jessup, saw the need for a journal where young writers could write realistically and honestly about their experiences without an eye toward what New York called "salability."

In a *Midland* editorial, Frederick spelled out the dilemma:

Any young writer who takes it as his aim to write sincerely and competently of American life as he knows it is met by the editorial demand that he distort characters, exaggerate situations, and develop a glib and blatant style. Otherwise, there is no place for his work. (XVI, p. 369)

It was not only young writers who were being harmed by the state of affairs, Frederick thought. Because New Yorkers

chose what would appear in print, the Middle West and other regions of the country were being short-changed in our literature: "A result has seemed to be a tendency to false emphasis, distortion, in literary interpretations.... New England or California or Scotland might have been less adequately and helpfully interpreted if London had selected all writings in English that were to appear in print." (VI, p. 1)

Partly by sheer perseverance Frederick helped to keep the Middle West, and particularly Iowa, from being short-changed. For 18 years, almost single-handedly at times, he kept his non-commercial journal alive. He edited it, published it, wrote for it, defended it, lectured endlessly about it, solicited funds for it, used it in his college classes, mailed out its copies, and often paid its debts out of his own modest earnings as a teacher and farmer. And his efforts bore rich fruit. By the 1920s any Iowan who thought he might be a writer sent Frederick his material and waited expectantly for the always blunt, but always understanding criticism. (Frederick signed his replies "Cordially yours.") The magazine was receiving ten manuscripts or more each day, and attracting material not only from the Midwest, but from other regions as well. By 1923, H. L. Mencken, the "scourge of Baltimore," could write in the *Smart Set*: "*Midland* is probably the most influential literary periodical ever set up in America, though its actual circulation has always been small." (July, 1923, p. 141) And in 1930 Edward J. O'Brien, the influential critic who each year published a collection called *Best Short Stories*, wrote that Frederick and *Midland* might even lead Iowa City to eclipse

New York as the publishing center of the country:

Two generations ago Boston was the geographical centre of American literary life, one generation ago New York could claim pride of place, and I trust that the idea will not seem too unfamiliar if I suggest that the geographical centre today is Iowa City.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of Frederick's efforts. He encouraged a whole generation of Iowa and Midwestern writers. Paul Engle, longtime head of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, has recalled that when he first saw a copy of *Midland* as a schoolboy in Cedar Rapids, he was immediately struck by the fact that it was unlike any magazine he had ever seen before, unlike the ones his mother read or the ones he could buy in the local drugstore. He had discovered, he said, a journal that took good fiction seriously, and a place to send his own beginning work for consideration and sensitive criticism.

James Hearst, the Cedar Falls poet, recalls an even larger debt:

I doubt if I could emphasize too strongly the influence John T. Frederick has had on my writing--and on my life too. Like most beginning writers, I was shy, self-conscious about my work and I tended to imitate the older poets. But Mr. Frederick took me in hand, so to speak, and taught me by example and precept that genuine poems grow like corn in the fields of our own experiences. I learned that a poem did not need to be about Truth, Beauty and God but could see the meaning and pattern in farm life and the inner life of the farmer. THE MIDLAND opened doors for me that I never suspected would open.

Before his recent death, Marquis Childs, the distinguished journalist, wrote, "There was a time when I thought that I would stay at the University of Iowa and try to be a more serious writer rather than a journalist, and the reason was

largely Frederick and the inspiration that he offered."

Throughout most of the journal's history, almost every poem, story, or article received was carefully read and returned with a handwritten note or individually typed letter by Frederick or Frank Luther Mott, his co-editor from 1925-30. This took hours each day for Frederick, who then had a growing family, a full-time teaching job, and was working on his own novels. But as one editor wrote in 1927, "Frederick is patient as Griselda ... The cataract of manuscript never wearies him. He is tolerant of letter writers and advice seekers. He will read the most unattractive looking stuff, I am told, thinking himself well repaid if he finds one grain of good in a ton of chaff."

Frederick discovered more than a few grains of good. He published the work of many important regional writers and the beginning work of others who were to become prominent critics, playwrights, journalists, and naturalists: James T. Farrell, Mark Van Doren, Ruth Suckow, William March, Cleanth Brooks, John B. Neihardt, Howard Mumford Jones, Maxwell Anderson, MacKinlay Kantor, August Derleth, Loren Eiseley, etc.

Those whose material actually appeared in *Midland* represented only the tip of the iceberg. The Iowa-born novelist Wallace Stegner never gained publication, but benefited from Frederick's criticism of his stories when he was young enough for that criticism to be helpful. Later, he wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature*:

In effect, John T. Frederick and his friends on *The Midland* did for fiction, through the little magazine what Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook of the Provincetown Players had done for drama through the

The Midland

A MAGAZINE OF
THE MIDDLE WEST

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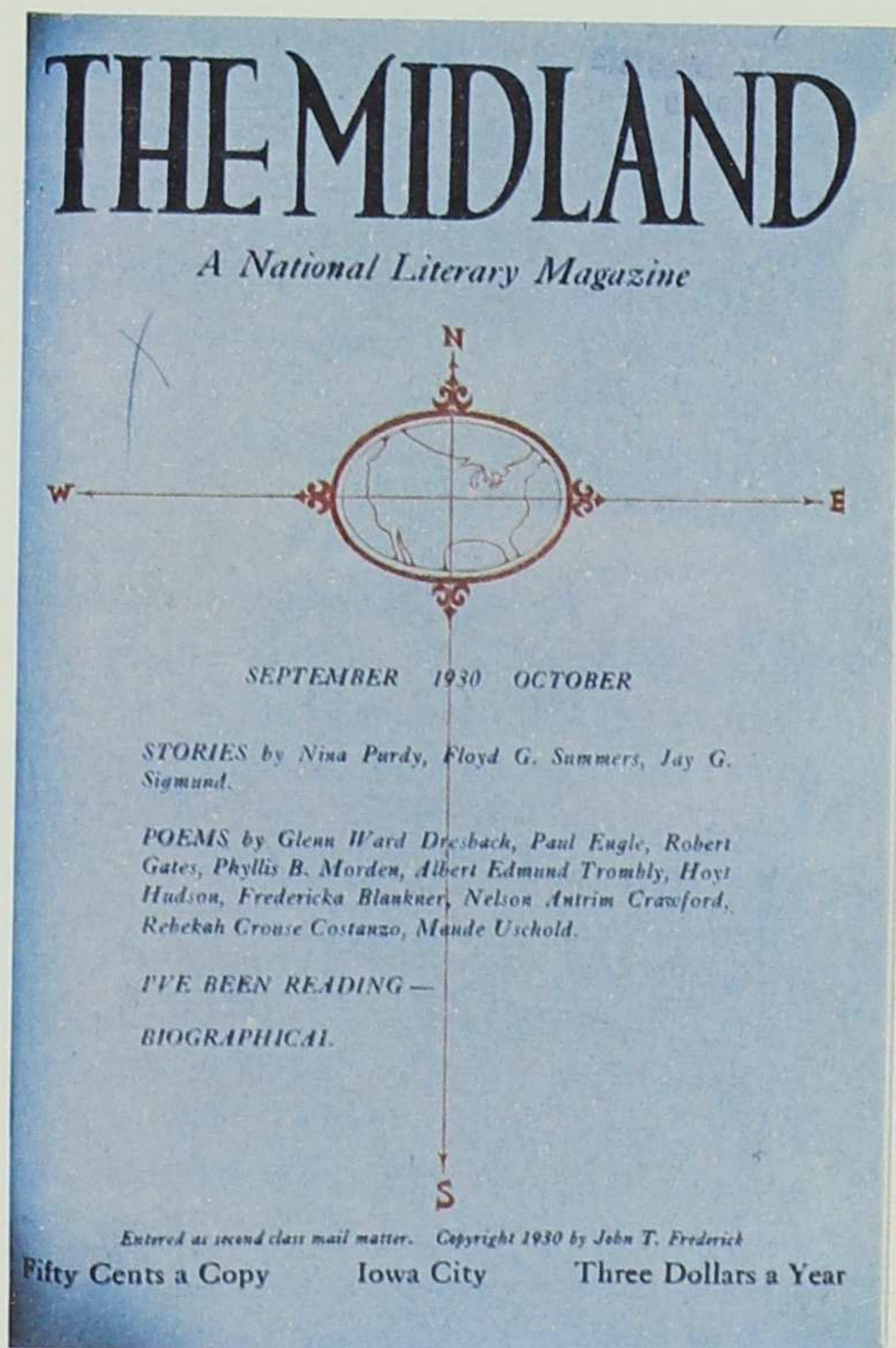
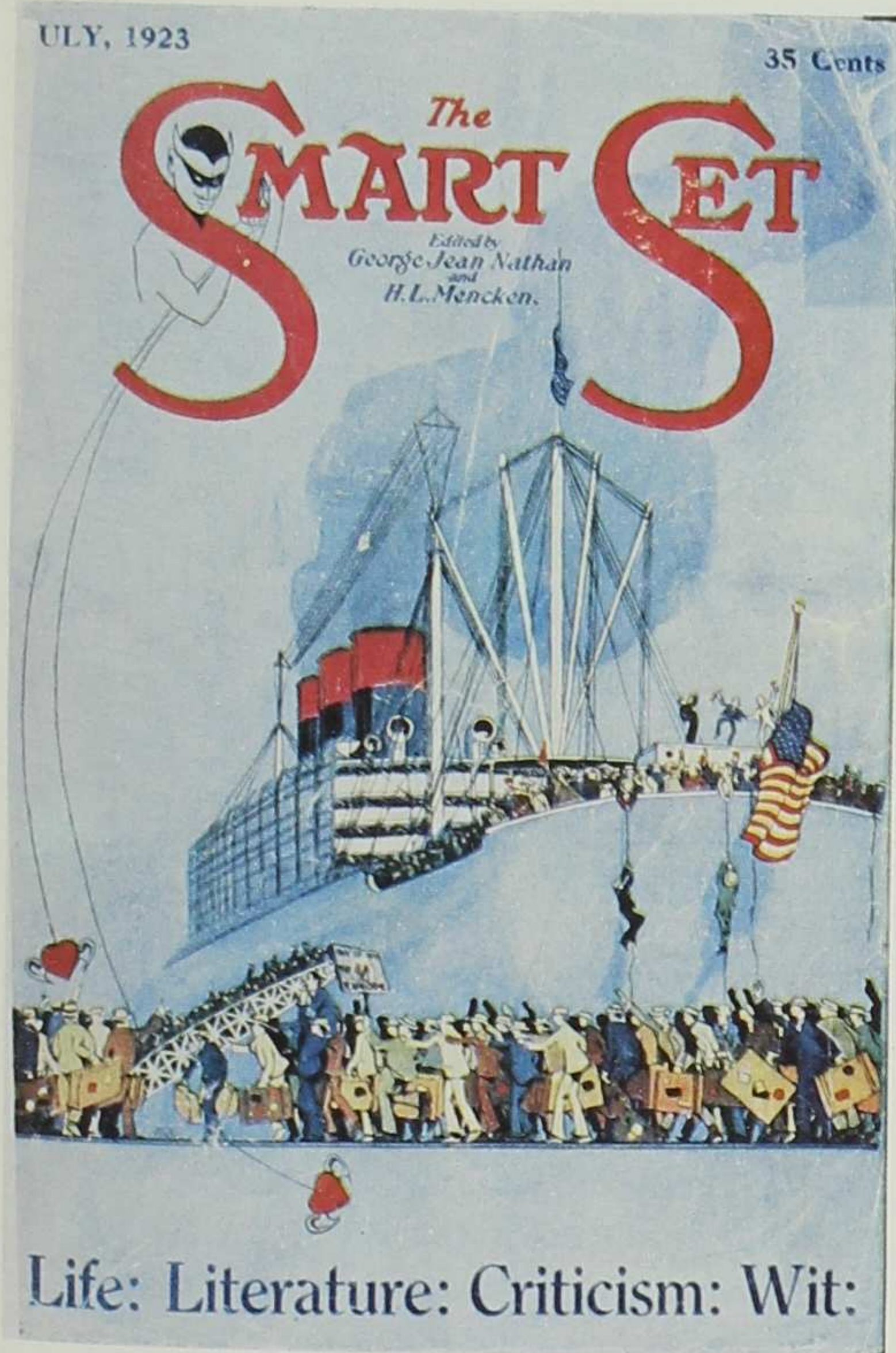


Covers from two of the most important literary journals of the 1920s and '30s, H. L. Mencken's irreverent *Smart*

little theatre. But the regional flavor...of Frederick's magazine...and the fact that his work had been done in and for Iowa and the Middle West, have made this unselfish and helpful critic and editor the greatest single force in Iowa letters in the past twenty-five years. (July 30, 1938)

Midland finally succumbed to the Depression in 1933. Frederick had run up a personal debt of several thousand dollars in the struggle to keep it alive. To help pay off the debt, he turned to part-time teaching jobs at both Northwestern University and Notre Dame, and he began to devote more time to book reviewing. He wrote a weekly book column in

the Sunday magazine of the *Chicago Sun* during its existence from 1942-47 and later a regular book column for *The Rotarian*, the magazine of Rotary International. During the '30s and '40s, he conducted an immensely popular CBS radio program "Of Books and Men," aired by more than 50 stations across the nation. Each month the listening public responded to the program with a thousand letters or so, and when Frederick recommended 50 books before Christmas of 1940, people immediately sent in 2,000 requests for copies. The 1941 entry on Frederick in *Current Biography* suggests the reason for the program's success:



Set (courtesy of Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries) and John T. Frederick's regionalist The Midland.

OF MEN AND BOOKS owes its increasing popularity in large part to the fact that Professor Frederick is a remarkably good speaker who talks of books simply and informally from a warmly sympathetic viewpoint, with both understanding and humor. His manner of quiet sincerity and convincing enthusiasm for what is good in the current output makes listeners want to read the books themselves.

One reason Frederick's teaching career was so diversified, successful, and long was that he made students, as well as radio listeners, want to read good books. Along with everything else, he was—for exactly 60 years—a

teacher. He had begun his teaching career at the age of 18, in 1911, as the sole high school teacher, athletic coach, and superintendent of schools in the village of Prescott, Iowa. He roomed and boarded with parents, and after two years, he had earned enough to return to the University of Iowa, where he had earlier dropped out due to lack of funds. Once back at the University, he debated, he was elected President of his senior class, and he was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa. He stayed on at Iowa as a student teaching assistant and published *Midland* until 1917, when he earned his Master's. He taught next at Moorhead State

Normal College in Minnesota, where he found in a poll he took that 80% of his students had grown up speaking German or a Scandinavian language in their homes.

In 1919 Frederick momentarily gave up teaching to try "pioneering" in the frontier area at the top of Michigan's lower peninsula. He talked his father into selling his Adams County farm and, together, they bought 1,400 acres of land (paying \$1 an acre for some of it), which included two small lakes, woodland, pasture, and 200 acres of farm land. Soon they cleared more woodland, raised cattle, sheep, and alfalfa, and built a large stone house with their own hands. A half-day's drive to the nearest store, "Glen-nie," as Frederick called his Michigan farm, remained a summer retreat for the Fredericks even after he went back to full-time teaching in 1921 at the University of Iowa. For the next 41 years he taught creative writing and American literature at Iowa, Pittsburgh, Northwestern and Notre Dame. On his "retirement" in 1962 Notre Dame awarded him a Doctor of Letters.

Few Doctorates have been more worthily earned. Sargent Bush, Jr. has written that Frederick's scholarly articles "strongly resist any attempt to cast them into a general type or category":

They include essays in literary history, deeply researched source-studies such as his authoritative article on Cooper's sources of information on Indians, essays involving wide familiarity with very recent fiction, explications of individual works of fiction, and essays on pedagogy and the philosophy of teaching.

Also Frederick had published several textbooks for high school and college, including: the popular *Handbook of Short Story Writing* (used at Harvard

for many years); plays; short stories; poetry (including poems published in the prestigious *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in both 1919 and 1967); non-literary articles (published in such diverse magazines as *The New Republic* and *The Review of Politics*); and three novels. *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* claims that the case Frederick makes in his novels for the superiority of the rural, Midwestern life is "the strongest case that has been or can be made for it."

If anyone ever believed--heart and mind--in the superiority of the farm over the city, it was John T. Frederick. Almost everything he did in his 82 years bore the stamp of his rural Iowa origins. On a very hot August day in 1971 this writer visited him at his farm four miles southwest of Iowa City. He received me in overalls on the back porch he shared with a rooster his granddaughter had hatched in her biology class. We went up a narrow, turning staircase to his "study," an unused bedroom strewn with books, manuscripts and papers. He directed me to sit in the only chair; he sat on an old iron bed. He talked of two novels he hoped to publish and of a critical study of Charles Dickens' works he thought he might begin in the winter. (I had just spent a month trying to finish Dickens' *Bleak House* and this 78-year-old man was blithely talking about rereading all of Dickens' 30,000 pages!)

From time to time that afternoon Frederick looked out of the window and talked with pride of the farm below. He thought it might be the only farm in Iowa to have remained in the same family since its founding in the 1850s. The great-great-grandson of the founder worked a field in the middle distance.

Often when Frederick couldn't remember something he called to his wife Lucy, who was in the next room working on a scrapbook for a grandchild. Their exchanges through the wall were warm and affectionate--the exchanges of two people used to and satisfied with each other. Although Frederick's recall was not as sharp as it had been two years before, he was so sympathetic to the project I had come to him with, and he was so helpful, that I got first hand a feeling for what it must have been like when

young authors, badly in need of encouragement and inspiration, came to him through the *Midland*.

I left the farm eager to finish my project, and I did, even ahead of schedule. I realized then that Frederick had done for me what he had been doing constantly for 60 years, and I knew why he had been able to exert such influence on so many 20th-century writers and students. Despite his age, despite his low-keyed unpretentiousness, it seemed clear to me that, very simply, he was a great man. □

COMMENTARY

In the last issue of *The Palimpsest* (January/February 1978), we incorrectly identified the Swedish Methodist church in Jefferson Township as the Swedish Baptist church. The error, for which I offer my sincerest apologies to the Reverend Charles Sloca and his congregation, occurred in the caption on page 13 of Ardith K. Melloh's article, "New Sweden."

We ask our readers to forgive this oversight.

Those many people who have expressed interest in the article will be pleased to know that the Swedish Lutheran church, built in 1860, and appearing both on the cover and on page 10, has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

I wish you good reading.

Charles Phillips

CONTRIBUTORS

A native of Superior, Wisconsin, ANTHONY BUKOSKI earned his B.A. there from Wisconsin State University. He received an M.A. from Brown University, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and is now completing his Ph.D. in English at the University of Iowa. His short stories have appeared in several literary quarterlies, and he has published critical articles on Jack London, and on Southern literature.

STEVE WILBERS was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He took his B.A. at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and spent a year at Vanderbilt-in-France. He received his M.A. in English from the University of Iowa, and he is now completing his Ph.D. at Iowa. Wilbers' article on the Iowa City writers' clubs is part of a longer study on the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His interest in the study was a result of his commitment to the Iowa City community, as evidenced in his service on the Iowa City-Johnson County Arts Council, his originating of the Iowa Creative Reading Series,

and his work as founding editor of *prairie grass*, a monthly newsletter funded by grants from the Iowa Arts Council and NEA. Wilbers has published articles on the Workshop in the *North American Review* and several other publications.

Born in Washington D.C., MILTON M. REIGELMAN received an A.B. in philosophy from the College of William and Mary and worked for *The Washington Post* before taking his Masters of Communication from the University of Pennsylvania. While teaching at the University of Iowa, he earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English. In 1976 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for summer study at Yale University. Presently, Reigelman teaches English and American literature at Centre College of Kentucky in Danville. Reigelman's interest in John T. Frederick is evident in his seminal study of Frederick's magazine in *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (published by the University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1975).