

## Writer and Historian

Besides directing the State Library capably, Johnson Brigham found time for critical and historical writing. During the years 1899 to 1901 he edited a weekly column called "Books and Men" in the Des Moines *Daily Capital* where in chatty fashion he commented sometimes critically and sometimes philosophically on current European, British, and American writings. His articles appeared in such magazines as *Century*, *Scribners*, *Youth's Companion*, *Chautauquan*, *Review of Reviews*, *Forum*, *Annals of Iowa*, *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, and the *Iowa Quarterly*. For the *Encyclopedia Americana* he was asked to contribute the article on Iowa.

In 1917 Johnson Brigham's experience was requisitioned in the publication of *Prairie Gold*. The Iowa Press and Authors' Club agreed to pool their resources and publish a regional anthology. The Club chose Johnson Brigham as editor-in-chief, with Lewis Worthington Smith and Helen Cowles LeCron as assistants. To this anthology of 350 pages Iowa writers contributed most generously. Outstanding in fiction were Alice French, Hamlin Garland, Ellis Parker Butler, Arthur Davison Ficke, Alice C. Weitz, Frank Luther Mott,

James Norman Hall, and Rupert Hughes. Some who sent in verse were Tacitus Hussey, Major S. H. M. Byers, Ethel Hueston, Randall Parish, Edwin Ford Piper, and Emerson Hough. "Ding" Darling added much to the book by supplying his inimitable cartoons.

A dozen years later Johnson Brigham was asked by the Iowa State Teachers Association to enlarge and unify the articles on Iowa authors which had appeared in *Midland Schools* into a handbook which was later entitled *A Little Book of Iowa Authors by Iowa Authors*. In the Preface the editor stated that the book was designed "to encourage Iowa youth to creative expression and Iowans generally to a larger interest in what was being done in the field of literature by Iowa writers."

All in all the little book contained sixteen biographical sketches, among them those of Hamlin Garland, Alice French, Ruth Suckow, Bess Streeter Aldrich, and Frank Luther Mott. Two other chapters discussed briefly a number of promising young writers, such as MacKinlay Kantor, Jay G. Sigmund, Thomas W. Duncan, and James Hearst. This book filled a great need in Iowa, and thanks to its contributors and able editorship it has remained the standard source for reference concerning the writers of Iowa.

Between 1905 and 1934 Brigham published eight books, most of them relating to the history of Iowa. The first of these, *An Old Man's Idyl*,

which paid an outstanding tribute to his wife, has already been discussed. It came from the press in 1905. An address before the Bankers' Club annual dinner furnished the nucleus of his *Banker in Literature*. After examining hundreds of histories, novels, and biographies by French, British, and American writers, he brought his findings together into a 250-page book which the Bankers Publishing Company of New York issued in 1910.

In 1912 he printed a brochure entitled *A Library in the Making*, which had recently appeared in the *Annals of Iowa* with the same title. A year later appeared his biography of James Harlan. Written under the direction of Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, it added a valuable volume to the biographical series of the State Historical Society at Iowa City. The research, covering five years, made the book "the most laborious literary task" which Brigham had ever undertaken. He found James Harlan a man after his own heart, a self-made man of integrity, who came to Iowa in 1846 to teach in the short-lived Iowa City College, and was elected to the United States Senate in 1855. For this biography Brigham was given free access to Harlan's personal memoirs, letters, and papers. This was made possible by Robert Lincoln, the only surviving son of President Lincoln, and of his wife, Mary Harlan Lincoln, the daughter of James Harlan.

Brigham's next four books, all of historical na-

ture, entailed infinite research in the archives of the State Department of History in Des Moines, especially the newspaper files which he had so diligently collected. His idea of recording history was liberal, for he wanted to probe through the bare bones of records, as he said, to "the spirit which brooded over community life."

In 1911 *The History of Des Moines and Polk County* appeared in two large volumes, the first covering the history of the city and county, and the second, with which Johnson Brigham had no direct responsibility, containing biographical sketches of the men and women who had made or were making local history.

In 1915 he published *Iowa, Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*, which first appeared in four volumes, two of which were historical and two biographical. As the title implies, Johnson Brigham chose to stress the endeavors of the men and women who made Iowa. His ideas of the importance of the hero, sung and unsung, are expressed clearly in his Preface, where he wrote, "At all times in Iowa history there have been *men*, — creative souls that, though they sometimes relaxed their efforts, rose to emergencies and mastered material things, — men divinely commissioned for leadership who, nevertheless, recognized the collective wisdom of 'the plain people.' "

According to this belief, he inserted numerous sketches of the leading men of the state, such as

Joseph Street, Indian agent; William Salter of the Iowa Band; Samuel Kirkwood, Iowa's Civil War governor; T. S. Parvin, father of Iowa Masonry; George Grover Wright, jurist; and George D. Perkins of the *Sioux City Journal*. Two brochures, privately printed, one of political and one of scholarly nature, *Blaine, Conkling and Garfield* (1919) and *The Many Sided Omar* (1925), show his diverse interests.

In 1927 he tried his hand at a historical novel, *The Sinclairs of Old Fort Des Moines*, which is better history than fiction. Though the narrative interest flags at times, the reader is rewarded by vivid pictures of the establishing of the old Fort at the juncture of the Raccoon and the Des Moines rivers, and close-up views of the villages of Keokuk and Poweshiek.

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