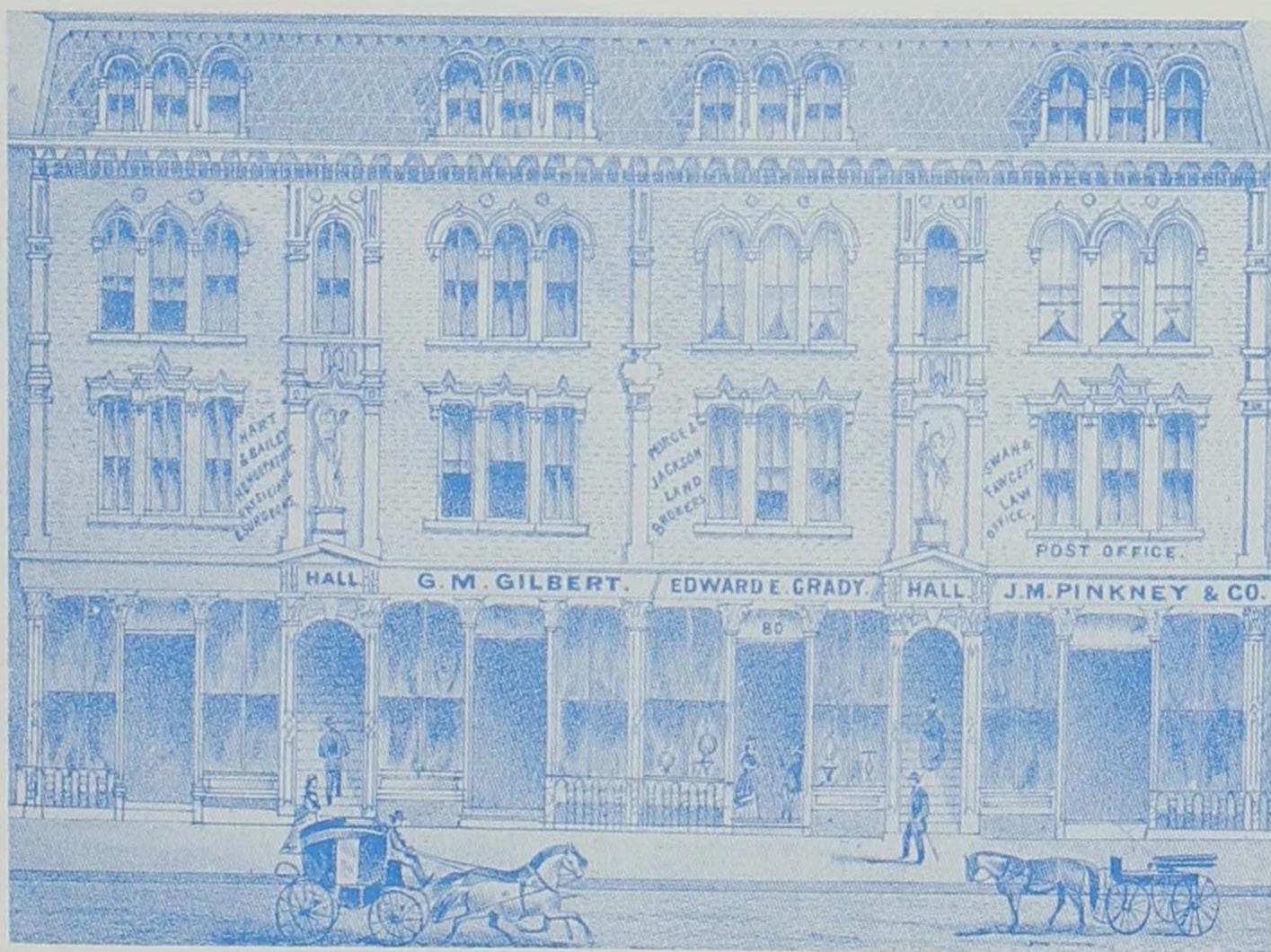


*The*  
**PALIMPSEST**



SIoux CITY BUSINESS BLOCK ABOUT 1875

Published Monthly by  
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Iowa City, Iowa

FEBRUARY 1954



# THE PALIMPSEST

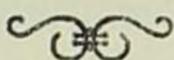
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## An Introductory Note

The traveler across Iowa by rail, road, or air sees millions of fertile acres dotted by hundreds of villages and towns and by a score of substantial cities. Though Iowa, happily, is free from the top-heavy urban influence of a great metropolis that obtains in most of the neighboring states, she has shared with the whole nation many of the effects of the profound change from farm to factory, from rural village to city, that has transformed American life in the past century. Like Howells, Dreiser, Lewis, and Marquand, Iowa writers have found in town and city life themes for fiction that well deserve thoughtful attention.

At the outset let us define our terms and agree on proper standards, for standards are necessary in any critical appraisal of fiction with a regional background. Good regional writing is, simply, good writing that uses distinctively regional materials. The presence of recognizable—even of firmly realized—local setting does not of itself make good fiction; but we are justified in demanding of

the writer who uses an ascertainable regional setting that he shall present it truthfully. The writer's work, granted he has an interest in the background he is using, a capacity for discriminating observation, and sincerity, will have significance as social record and commentary whether or not it has other merit. If within an environment clearly seen and honestly presented it reveals characters and experiences of universal human meaning, it rises into the realm of true literary value.

Ruth Suckow expressed the nub of the matter in her fine essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks*, "An Almost Lost American Classic": "To sum up: the characters in *Oldtown Folks*, while sharply set in time and place — as all human life is set, whatever the particular setting may be — are treated as eternal souls."

For over half a century writers of fiction have been using Iowa towns and cities as backgrounds for novels and short stories. In surveying their work we can appropriately consider it in two aspects. Viewing it first as social history, we shall inquire as to its accuracy and its adequacy, its motives and its assumptions. Beyond these matters, we must try to form judgments as to the degree of genuine literary achievement attained by each of these many writers.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

## Before World War I

*Hamlin Garland*

The portrayal of Iowa towns in fiction got off to a good start. In one of the first and finest of the short stories of Hamlin Garland, "A Day's Pleasure" (in *Main Travelled Roads*, 1891), we have one of the most memorable treatments of small town people and experience in the whole record. The story is that of a farmer's wife who accompanies her husband to town. She is pictured with Garland's characteristic unsparing realism: ". . . her best dress . . . had never been a good fit, and now she was getting so thin it hung in wrinkled folds everywhere about the shoulders and waist. . . . Her hair loosened and blew unkemptly about her face."

Her small shopping is soon completed, and she is compelled to wait for her husband. The grocer is impersonally kind to her — he is accustomed to the presence of such farm women in his store; but she grows ashamed of staying there so long, and goes out to tramp the streets of the little town for hours, carrying her heavy baby. Ultimately she is befriended by a town woman, the lawyer's wife, who invites her to come into her pleasant house for a rest and treats her with genuine kindness. The

town itself is seen sharply and accurately for the raw and limited place it is: ". . . a cluster of small frame houses and stores on the dry prairie beside a railway station. There were no trees yet which could be called shade trees." The farm woman is viewed with the profound compassion characteristic of Garland; the action of the town woman gives the story a dimension of human significance which it would otherwise lack.

Humor — a rarity in Garland — marks a somewhat later story, "Some Village Cronies" (*Prairie Folks*, 1895). It chronicles a checker game between the champions of Rock and Cerro Gordo counties. The contestants "were seated in Robie's grocery, behind the rusty old cannon stove," and their gallery included the local editor, judge, "professor," and others. The humor turns on persistent and unsparing chaffing of one of the players, Colonel Peavy, about his baldness.

"Did you ever notice, gentlemen, how lying and baldness go together?" queried Foster [the editor] reflectively.

"No! Do they?"

"Invariably, I've known many colossal liars, and they were all as bald as apples."

So it goes, on and on. Yet the Colonel, sorely beset as he is, wins his game.

For the most part, however, Garland's Iowa fiction is of the farm rather than the town. Though he records delightfully in *A Son of the Middle Border* his experience in the town of Osage when

his family lived there for a short time, and that of boarding in town in order to attend the academy after his parents returned to the farm, he made little other use of this material in his fiction. In his farm stories, when "town" is mentioned it is usually with an undertone of the hostility felt by the farmer toward the banker who holds a mortgage, or the merchant who demands payment of a bill.

In one of the longest of Garland's stories that employ a town setting, "A Stop-Over at Tyre," there is a memorably-phrased reference to the "small, dull towns where farmers trade and traders farm." Thus, in spite of the small space given to town life in his fiction, Garland did recognize the close and often antagonistic relationship between farm and town that unquestionably was a major social fact for a long period of Iowa's history. He did achieve real literary artistry in the best of his stories.

*Octave Thanet (Alice French)*

Totally different from Garland's harsh experience on Iowa farms was the early life of Alice French, who under the pen name "Octave Thanet" gave to American literature its first sustained and competent portrayal of a small Midwestern city. She was the daughter of a New England capitalist who early acquired business interests in Davenport and moved there. When his daughter began to write fiction in the 1880's she used at first her experience of an earlier sojourn in Arkansas.

It was not until the appearance of *Stories of a Western Town* in 1893 that she turned definitely to Iowa for her material.

During the next ten years Octave Thanet was widely read and highly esteemed. She was regularly named among the foremost regional writers of the time (with the Middle West as her special field), and her stories appeared in major literary magazines. When she died in 1934, at the age of eighty-four, her work had sustained the unjust condemnation and subsequent neglect which the period of the First World War and the 1920's had visited on most of the fiction of the preceding generation. A reappraisal will find a good deal of value in the Iowa stories and novels of Octave Thanet.

Although her stories are sentimental, they achieve an interesting and fairly objective picture of "Fairport." It is a city of definite social classes, with little crossing of the lines of demarcation — though in "Tommy and Thomas" we have the story of a saloon-keeper's son who rises to political power (and deserves it), and achieves a socially distinguished marriage. In these stories we visit an old-fashioned furniture factory of many floors, the neat cottage of a workingman, a crowded tenement, and a mansion set in a hillside estate. We see a good deal of the general face of Fairport, with its brick-paved streets, its streetcars, its many trees, its hills above the river. This background is

never self-consciously supplied — it is functional. Her stories, for all their “happy-ending” quality, hold interest and gain a qualified conviction: to me, they seem improbable stories about real people.

Representative of Octave Thanet’s treatment of an Iowa city in fiction, and perhaps the most interesting of her novels, is *The Man of the Hour*, published in 1905. Octave Thanet was a disciple of William Dean Howells, and in nothing more devout than in her emulation of his attempts to deal in fiction with the urgent contemporary problem of worker-employer relations. Thus, *The Man of the Hour* has as its central character a young man who — born to wealth as a member of one of Fairport’s mill-owning families — becomes for a time a radical labor leader and union organizer, but later returns to the employer class as one who works constructively for better understanding.

The plot is excessively complicated, and the sequence of events not wholly convincing. But the novel is marked by detailed presentation of the “upper upper” class of Fairport’s society — an aristocracy by no means of wealth alone, but one in which professional achievement and family background are recognized. The presentation is notably objective. Sometimes it is definitely satirical, as in the portrayal of the guest at a whist party of the elite who reports:

There are two strikers’ families live opposite us, down

in the ravine on St. Katharine Street; I don't suppose they've had a *good* meal for a week. I send them in skim milk every day, and in fact I tell Nannie to give them anything we've left over.

The contrasting group of workmen's families is less extensively treated, and with measurably less sureness. The portrayal of a corrupt union organizer carries more conviction.

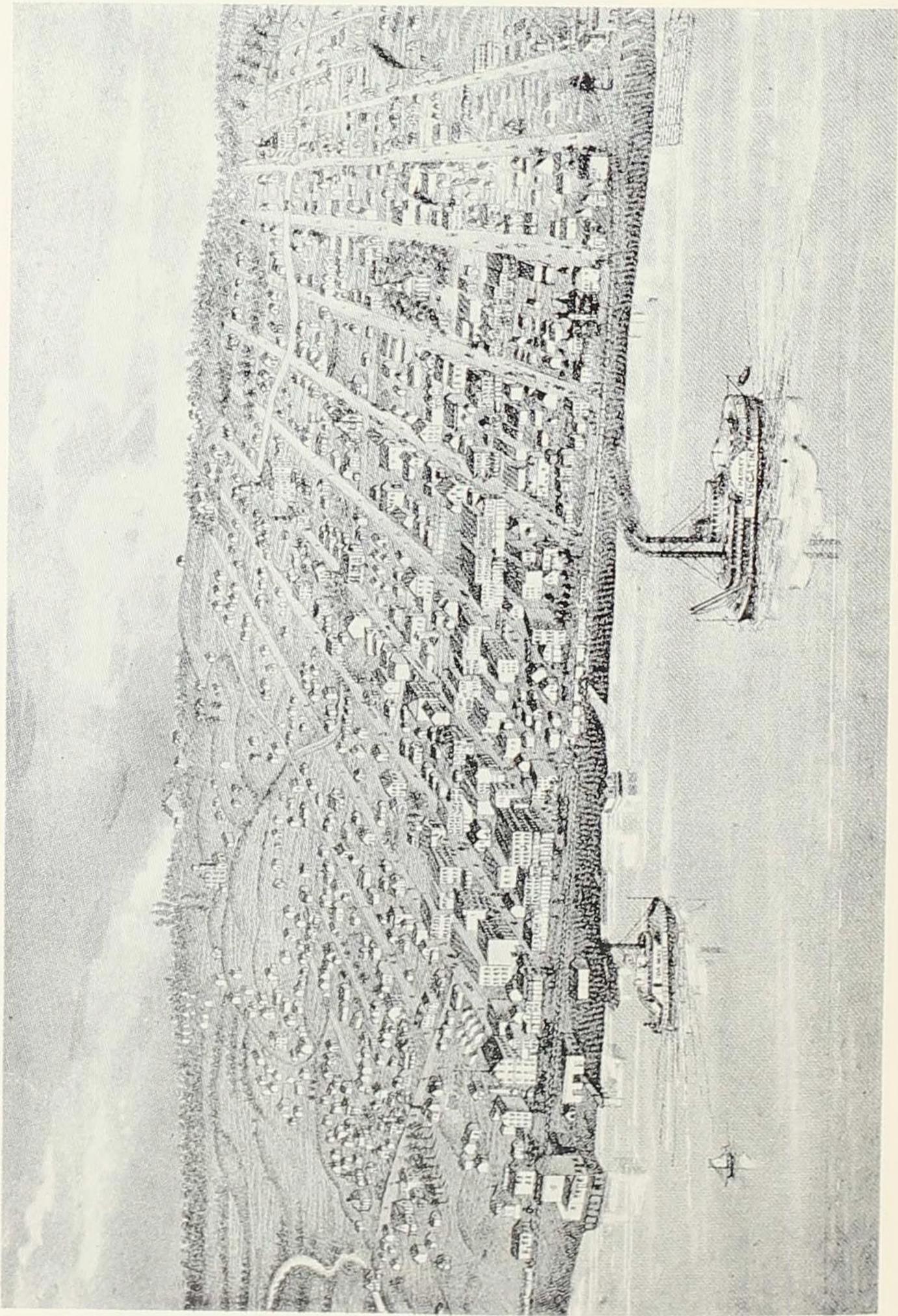
One of the socially significant general aspects of Iowa town and city life stressed by Octave Thanet is the effect of the Centennial Exposition of 1876. She felt the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 was especially "the West's dream of beauty," because of its stimulating interest in the arts and in shaping public taste. Also she notes that in the decades following the Civil War, "the Woman's Club lifted a modest finger at the passing car of progress, and unobtrusively boarded it." Fairport had two women's clubs in 1881.

Both clubs tackled the same great themes of ethics and art, and allotted a winter to the literature of a nation, except in the case of the Greek and Roman literatures, which were not considered able to occupy a whole winter apiece, so they were studied in company. The club possessed a proper complement of officers, and their meetings went from house to house. . . . Only at a moment of excitement was the chair addressed by her Christian name.

That has deftness which may well have made Howells proud of his disciple. Despite her not always gentle satire, Octave Thanet recognized the substantial part played by women's clubs in shap-



JOHN T. FREDERICK



—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*  
Bird's Eye View of Muscatine

ing the cultural life and aspirations of Iowa cities and towns. The pages of the old *Midland Monthly* bear extensive evidence of their activity. All in all, the work of Octave Thanet repays thoughtful attention, both as literature and as social history. Her "Fairport" is the most sustained and penetrating fictional study of a small Midwestern city, in Iowa or elsewhere, before the First World War.

#### *Susan Glaspell*

The novels of Susan Glaspell were written at the beginning and almost at the end of her long and distinguished career as a playwright. *The Glory of the Conquered* appeared in 1909, *The Visioning* in 1911, and *Judd Rankin's Daughter* in 1945. These novels are so little identifiable as Iowan, however, in any way, that I shall not consider them here. Miss Glaspell's chief work is in her plays.

#### *Ellis Parker Butler*

A realism not unlike that of the early Hamlin Garland marks Ellis Parker Butler's serious novel of an Iowa town, *Dominie Dean*. It was published in 1917, at a time when the pressure of world events caused many good books to receive less attention than they deserved. The "Riverbank" of this novel is identified by the author's inscription in the copy owned by the State Historical Society of Iowa:

While the scene of this book is laid in Muscatine, I did not have the Rev. A. B. Robbins, of Muscatine, in mind when writing the character of David Dean, but based him on an uncle of mine, Lemuel Butler, a physician, who died when I was a boy and he was himself still a young man.

In an introductory note to the friend, a clergyman, who "suggested the writing and helped me with incident and inspiration," Butler says that he feels that his central character has become "less . . . a creature of my imagination than . . . someone I have known and loved all my life." In some degree he becomes just that to the reader. In the portrayal of David Dean, Butler achieved something rare in fiction: a character who is wholly and consistently a good man, and yet both credible and interesting. It is the genuine realism — as quiet and as uncompromising as that of Howells — with which Butler portrays the town of Riverbank (where David Dean lives his long life as a Presbyterian minister) that saves the central character from mawkishness and falsity; for David is completely integrated with the town in every aspect of its life.

You will have to imagine Riverbank as it was then to fully understand David and "Thusia: the mean little business street with its ugly buildings and dust, or mud, ankle deep; the commercial life out of all proportion to the social life, so that few men thought of aught beside business; the fair, shady streets of homes with maples already over-arching the streets and the houses of white or brick-red, all with ample lawns around them. You can see David

leave the little white manse beside the brick church and walk the shady streets, making a pastoral call or going to the postoffice. Those pastoral calls! Serious matters for a young dominie in those days! The dominie was expected to come like a plumber, with his kit of tools, ready to set to work on a leaky conscience or a frost-bit soul, and his visits were for little else but soul mending.

David's life as a dominie was no bed of roses. Church quarrels were frequent and intense, more often over purely personal matters than those of doctrine, though the latter gave trouble too. Some of David's gravest difficulties stemmed from the aggressive friendliness of one of his parishioners, the formidable Mrs. Lucille Hardcome.

She had money. . . . As Lucille furnished it her house seemed to us palatial in its elegance. . . . She certainly managed to get everything into the rooms that they would hold — even to a grand piano and a huge gilded harp on which she played with a great show of plump arms. . . . She painted a little, on china, on velvet and on canvas, and her rooms soon held a hundred examples of her work. . . . You could tell her roses from her landscapes even from across the room, for she painted large. It was the day of china plaques, and Lucille had the largest china plaque in Riverbank. It was three feet across. It was much coveted. Many of us can remember a Lucille Hardcome, in some other Iowa town. She and her house are authentic, both as data of social history and as a literary creation. There is authenticity, too — and the power of understatement — in our last view of David Dean, “a discarded and worn-out old man”:

I walked up the hill and over the hill and down the other side, to where the cheap little cottages stand in a row facing the deserted brickyard which will, some day, be town lots. I found David on the little porch, sitting in the sun. . . . He was very feeble. . . . It was evident they were very poor.

Altogether, the story of *Dominie Dean* is a truly worthy and substantial contribution to the literary record and interpretation of Iowa life. It is interesting to note that — among the several important professional groups represented in every Iowa town — the clergymen have received by far the lion's share of attention: first with *Dominie Dean*, later with Ruth Suckow's *The Bonney Family* and *New Hope*, and still later with the fine books of Hartzell Spence. As for *Dominie Dean*, the quality of this serious novel is so good as to make one wish that Ellis Parker Butler had written others, rather than devoting his powers to *Pigs Is Pigs* and the other little books, pleasant as they are, that won him fame as a humorist.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

## The Nineteen Twenties

*Herbert Quick*

Within half a decade, 1915-1920, there were added to American literature the Spoon River, Illinois, of Edgar Lee Masters; the Winesburg, Ohio, of Sherwood Anderson; and the Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, of Sinclair Lewis. In his autobiography, *One Man's Life*, published in 1925, Herbert Quick rebuked the practice of "a school of writers":

. . . who have set themselves to the analysis and description of country, village and town communities, with the purpose of displaying . . . their . . . sordid drabness, their utter poverty of inspiration, their lack of men and women above the plane of two legged horses and cattle. . . . I have spent a good deal of my life in such communities, and I have never failed from time to time and at important crises in my life to make contact with the souls who led me outward and upward.

Quick himself, in his novel published the preceding year, *The Invisible Woman*, and its predecessor, *The Hawkeye*, had failed to establish any strong sense of either physical or social setting in his Iowa towns. The only sustained impression of his "Monterey, Iowa," in *The Invisible Woman*, is in Christina Thorkelson's experience when she

first leaves the farm to work in the law office of Creede, Silverthorn and Boyd. She hears: ". . . the chorus of calls to work by the whistles of the few mills and industrial plants of Monterey — a chorus of which the good citizens were as proud as of the stone-crusher roar of the electric cars." As we read on, however, we find the novel strangely lacking in authentic atmosphere of a growing industrial city. Monterey proves to be only a vaguely modified small town, in which everybody knows everybody else and his business. An especial disappointment is Quick's failure to render a flavorful setting for the various county seat towns and county courthouses visited by Christina as a court reporter. There is the same failure in his treatment of Des Moines as the "convention city." Iowa politics is vastly oversimplified here, as throughout the book, in which the best elements are the characters and the plot. It is only in his treatment of the farm and the countryside that Quick contributed substantially to the creation of a durable literary image of Iowa.

There was a curious dichotomy in the American fiction of the 1920's, well illustrated in the treatment of Iowa cities and towns. On the one hand there was the hostile attitude toward American life which Quick strongly indicted. On the other hand there was the discovery of excellence in American life, the celebration of heroism and of dramatic achievement, chiefly in the record of the

American past as exemplified in specific communities. This second attitude, less strikingly apparent than the first, was nonetheless an important and characteristic aspect of the fiction of the decade following the First World War, in all regions of the nation. In the Middle West it is illustrated by O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, by Quick's *Vandemark's Folly*, and by the best work of Margaret Wilson and Bess Streeter Aldrich — both viewed here as writers of the 1920's because they attained prominence in that decade through their novels dealing primarily with farm life, though their most interesting studies of Iowa towns came a few years later.

#### *Margaret Wilson*

It is only in *The Law and the McLaughlins* (1937) that Margaret Wilson treats an Iowa town with any fullness, but in this book her touches are excellent. In a dramatic scene when Jean McLaughlin goes to the jail at night to release a prisoner, we see the scattered dwellings and outhouses of the village clearly, and the pasture coming right up to the courthouse. There is a brilliant, brief impression of the sheriff's house at Massabini, with its marvels of modernity to farmer eyes: "A sort of built-in sink, with tin washbasins in it, and a soft-water pump right in the center." The portrayal of the Iowa town in this novel is not limited to physical details:

Already the question of schools and taxes were [sic] dividing the inhabitants of Leader into two classes. The Scotch wanted a graded school, however much it cost them in taxes — a good graded school. The New Englanders wanted that, and an academy as well. Why should their children have to go forty miles to college when they might as well have a college in their home town! Hadn't every town in Iowa where New Englanders settled the beginnings of a college?

*Bess Streeter Aldrich*

It is in the story of just such a college — “Midwestern College” — that Bess Streeter Aldrich's *Miss Bishop* (1933) chiefly gains its place as the most interesting of Mrs. Aldrich's novels from our present point of view. It is located in “Oak River,” which can readily be identified as Cedar Falls.

In 1846 the prairie town of Oak River existed only in a settler's dream. . . . By 1876 it was sprawling over a large area with the cocksureness of a new midwestern town fully expecting to become a huge metropolis. . . . [It] has now settled down into a town of ten thousand.

The first building of the college is opened in 1876, and the central character of Mrs. Aldrich's novel is one of the first students. This building later becomes “Old Central Hall,” and is used as focus and symbol of the action throughout the book. The story of Midwestern College is perhaps typical of many colleges that have played so great a part in Iowa's history. This novel is almost a year by year chronicle, in terms of the personalities of teachers and presidents, curriculum

changes, and the addition of buildings and equipment.

As fiction the book's value is lessened by too great dependence on coincidence in the building of the plot, and by superficiality resulting in part from the disproportion between scope and length: only a master could have achieved with adequacy so much in so little space. Yet *Miss Bishop* deserves respect for its recognition of a great theme — the history of our colleges rendered in dramatic human terms — and for the sound values repeatedly revealed in its characterization.

An earlier work of Mrs. Aldrich, *The Cutters* (1926), provides a faithful and friendly account of another Iowa town:

Meadows, the abode of the Cutters, was not a city. . . . It was a small town in one of the Mid-West states, where there are almost as many hogs as automobiles. It had some pleasant homes, a good school, five churches, and a few blocks of stores.

Meadows is already subordinate to the nearby shopping center of Dale City. *The Cutters* is made up of rather sentimental and usually humorous stories, turning on incidents of family life.

#### *Carl Van Vechten*

In contrast to the sympathetic view illustrated in the work of Margaret Wilson and Bess Street-er Aldrich is the treatment of "Maple Valley, Iowa" in Carl Van Vechten's *The Tattooed*

*Countess* (1924), a novel which belongs emphatically to the more hostile type of fiction of the 1920's. In spite of a red-herring reference to Cedar Rapids in the text, it is not hard to determine the identity of the Iowa city to which the ultrasophisticated countess of this novel returns to visit her sister, and in which she finds diversion and solace in the person of a youth of aesthetic perceptions and pretensions. The time is 1897, and the Cedar Rapids of that day is pictured rather more fully and clearly than is Octave Thanet's Davenport of a corresponding period. We see "Pleasant Avenue," favored street of the well-to-do, with its "straight rows of elms, whose branches met and even interlocked, forming a canopy, a roof of leaves over the carriage." We visit "the quarter devoted to the Bohemian residents," where the cottages were painted in gay colors. There were signs in Czech, and women "with bright handkerchiefs bound about their heads or worn as scarfs around their shoulders, sat on their low doorsteps. Geese, chickens, and dogs owned the yards." We have a definite close-up of the city's industrial area, with "the great grain elevators, towering up to the sky," the maze of railroad tracks, the river almost dry.

In externals, then, Van Vechten's portrayal of an Iowa city is superior to most of those we shall find in our fiction. Internally *The Tattooed Countess* is straight out of Sinclair Lewis — a Sin-

clair Lewis whose style has grown stilted and is curiously marked by exotic words. Maple Valley is largely a localized Zenith (as made famous in *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*). We hear echoes of Sinclair Lewis in a tiresomely repeated joke about the local boosting of improvements (water works and a new high school building) which are still only prospective, and in a burlesqued "local pride" speech by a man who wants to get elected to the school board. The local journalist, dressmaker, musical prodigy are Lewis-like caricatures. The book has the merit that the countess is treated as unkindly as are all the other characters; but there is no hint that her view of Maple Valley is distorted or inadequate.

*Roger L. Sergel*

A more balanced realism marks another Iowa novel of the early 1920's — Roger L. Sergel's *Arlie Gelston*. Its first chapters establish a firm and accurate, though wholly unobtrusive, impression of "Coon Falls," where Arlie Gelston's father is the station agent. The town is felt through the characters, projected through their attitudes of aspiration or rebellion or acceptance, rather than objectively rendered: though the "Bijou" movie theater, where Arlie gets a job after quitting school against her parents' wishes, is brilliantly realized. The major values in *Arlie Gelston*, however, arise from universal human situations, the regional spec-

ification of which, though authentic and emotionally valid, is not in itself of primary importance. They are values of character and conduct which, in their complexity and in the sympathetic comprehension with which they are viewed, give the novel a continuing claim on serious attention.

*Josephine Herbst*

A painful family situation in a small town, apparently in Iowa, is the core of Josephine Herbst's competent novel, *Nothing Is Sacred* (1928). One of the three Winters sons-in-law has been using "lodge money" for what his sister-in-law calls "high living"; the old people have to mortgage their home to keep him out of prison. The book presents a searching but rather static group portrait of the family, with relatively little dramatic development of any character. There is no strong sense of the town. Social stratification is expressed in the existence of separate "groups" at the lodge dances. The defaulter's fellow lodge-members and church-members are a scummy, selfish lot without exception. A firm, controlled prose, and a proved capacity for rigorous selection of telling details, give this novel a distinction in execution not fully matched by its substance.

*Ruth Suckow*

The Second World War and the mid-century have given us a new perspective in relation to the literary output of the 1920's. Perhaps we have

not yet attained the historical distance requisite for decisive critical evaluation, but we can be much more sure of our judgments than we could be twenty years ago. In rereading the work of Ruth Suckow, therefore, I was happy to realize freshly and more fully than ever before — how good her books are. A lot of water has gone under the literary bridge since she wrote *Iowa Interiors*, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, *The Bonney Family*, *The Kramer Girls*, *The Folks*, and *New Hope*. Reputations have risen and fallen, fashions in fiction (only less transient than those in dress) have waxed and waned. In my work as a book reviewer, and a teacher of contemporary literature (and, presumably, for my sins), it has been my lot to read hundreds upon hundreds of new books of fiction through these years. At the same time I've been studying older American fiction — Hawthorne, Melville, Howells, James — year after year. It is against this background and with this perspective that I have reviewed Ruth Suckow's work, and that I believe it to be a part of American literature in the precise sense, marked by values that are durable and truly distinguished. She is the one all-Iowan writer for whom I can make this claim with confidence.

It is obvious that Ruth Suckow's early experience as the daughter of a Congregational minister gave her rich material. The life in half-a-dozen Iowa towns is beautifully recorded by Miss

Suckow in her most recent delightful book, *Some Others and Myself* (1952). But it is the spirit in which Miss Suckow used this material that made possible her achievement — a spirit neither partisan nor hostile — and her dedicated power as a writer that produced it. The town is *there* in her work, just as it was, for better or worse, set down neither with love nor with hate — save love for the living fact of whatever hue, hatred of the writer's besetting weaknesses of distortion and artifice. Her "New Hope," in her novel of that name, and her "Morning Sun," of *The Bonney Family*, are only the brightest of a whole gallery of towns in Miss Suckow's novels and stories, all firmly individualized, authentic, seen with penetration and in significant aspects. Can anyone ever get more of the atmosphere of an Iowa town of fifty years ago through a single detail than she does in the picture of little Wilfred Bonney bringing home the family cow? "Women getting supper smiled to see him trotting down the wide road through the soft warm dust patterned with shadows of leaves and branches, talking companionably to the cow."

A sense of place *as place* is strong and omnipresent in Ruth Suckow's work. Essence of Iowa is on an opening page of *The Bonney Family*:

There was something lush and rank about the mid-western summer — the moisture in the heat, the loftiness of elm branches with their dense foliage, the hot nasturtiums along the walk to the barn.

She has a special genius for houses: that of *The Kramer Girls*, that of the Grunewald sisters in "One of Three Others," that of the old couple in "Uprooted" are fused with the inmost experience of the story in each case and contribute substantially to it. Though small towns afford the backgrounds of most of Miss Suckow's books, she can etch sharply the raw, new residential district of "The Rapids" in *The Kramer Girls*, and touch deftly the college town of "Vincent Park" (where, to the horror of a professor's wife from New England, "some of the professors had actually never been abroad, and two or three of them had never even been east") in *The Bonney Family*.

But people are Miss Suckow's real concern, of course — people in their relation to other people and to their communities. The town is very strongly felt as social background in "Susan and the Doctor" of *Children and Older People*. Often a child's mind is the center of illumination for the community, as in "The Man of the Family" of the same volume, with the boy beginning to earn money by working at the drugstore. It is the extensive use of the child's point of view in *New Hope* which lends the town of that name its special interest, and the novel part of its high distinction. The world of high school youngsters is sensitively revealed in the adolescent Ruth of *The Kramer Girls*. It is the strong sense of a totality of such relationships that makes Miss Suckow's

towns so real and so important. Social distinctions exist in these towns; there are the relatively rich and the relatively poor, the privileged and the unprivileged. The boundaries change. Of the deaf spinsters in "One of Three Others" — "All three belonged to leading families; or what had been leading families" — and are so no longer. In nothing is Miss Suckow's mastery of her material more sure than in her ability to present people at extremes of the social scale with equal force and equal sympathy. In "Mrs. Vogel and Ollie" of *Some Others and Myself* we have a grand assortment of outcasts and misfits — the foul-mouthed Dee Slack, the mildly insane Queen Victoria Allerdyce, One-legged Joe, Mrs. Fickel — the hangers-on who relish Mrs. Vogel's sympathy and Ollie's coffeecake. They are portrayed very clearly, with abundance of sharp detail, but with no malice, no tinge of exploitation. In the same volume, in "An Elegy for Alma's Aunt Amy," we have the other extreme:

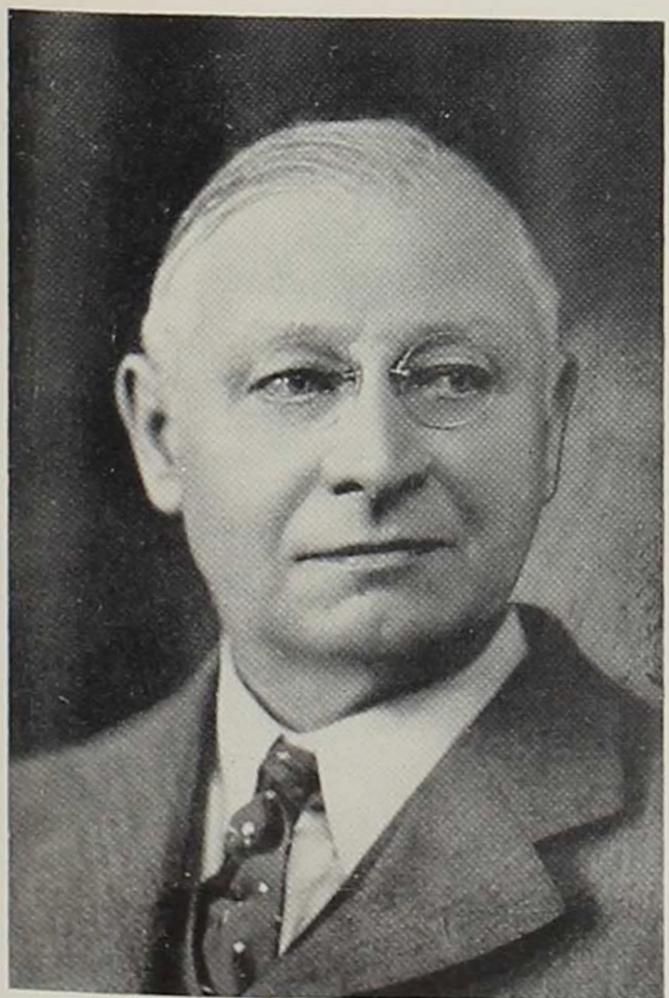
They were Middle-Western ladies. They were workers. Idleness — such an idea of ladyhood — filled them with disdain. They had known some early hardships. Although Mrs. Root was well-to-do — and Mr. Root had been "an awful good husband" — her fingers were a little knotted, and her figure was spread, and she had an ample, motherly bosom. Mrs. Root was getting elderly, but there was not much that went on in the town without her. She baked her marvelous angel cakes for the church suppers, and helped make the coffee for the high school banquet;



HAMLIN GARLAND  
West Salem, Wis. (1860-1940)



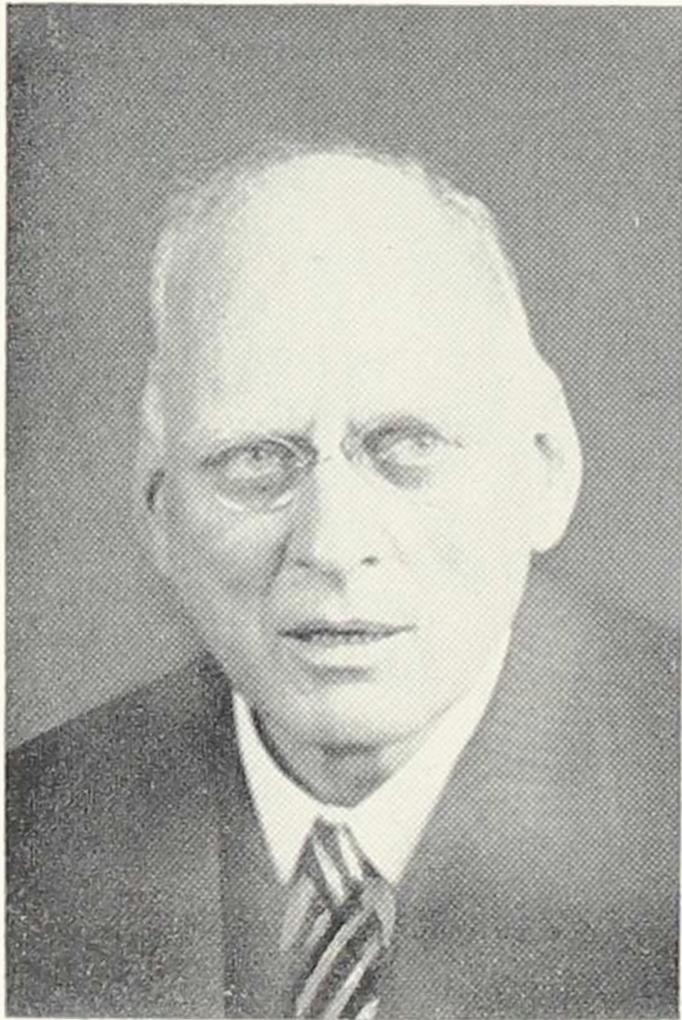
OCTAVE THANET (ALICE FRENCH)  
Andover, Mass. (1850-1934)



ELLIS PARKER BUTLER  
Muscatine (1869-1937)



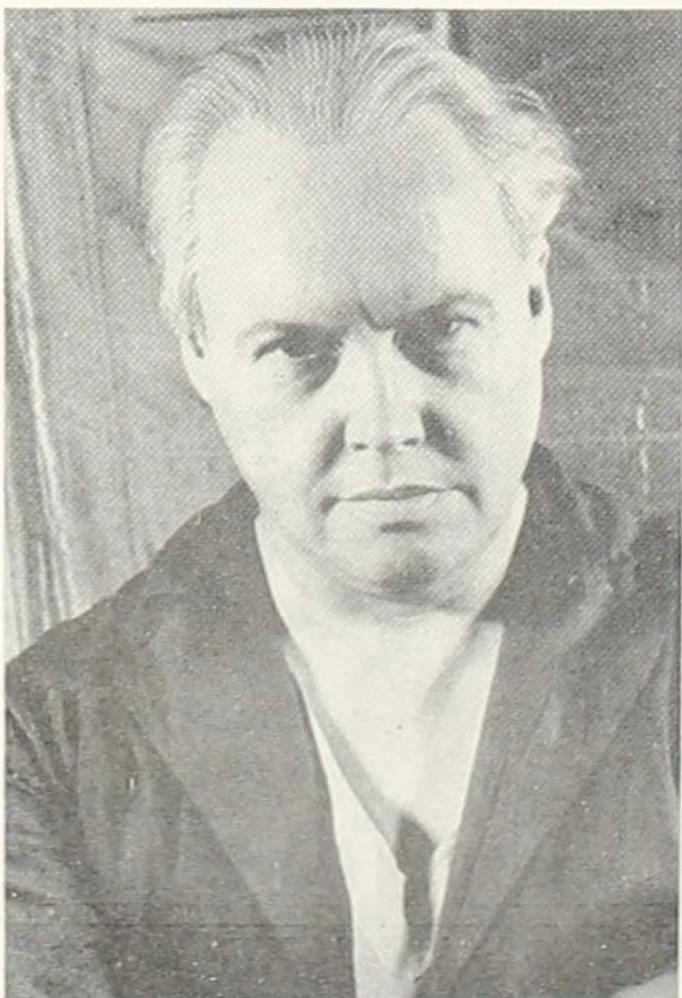
SUSAN GLASPELL  
Davenport (1882-1948)



HERBERT QUICK  
Steamboat Rock (1861-1925)



BESS STREETER ALDRICH  
Cedar Falls (1881- )



CARL VAN VECHTEN  
Cedar Rapids (1880- )



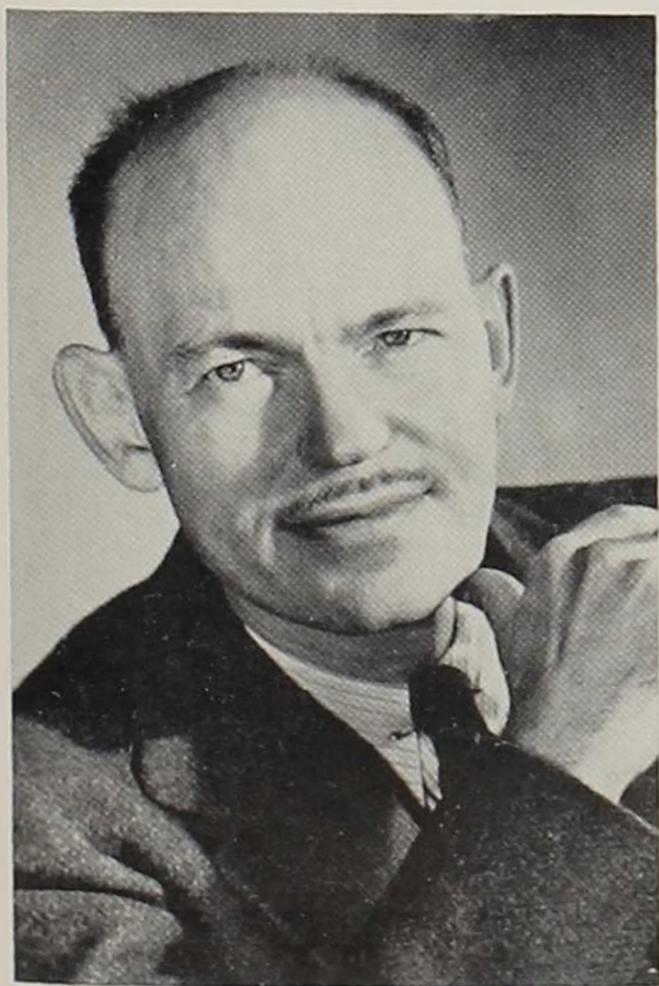
RUTH SUCKOW  
Hawarden (1892- )



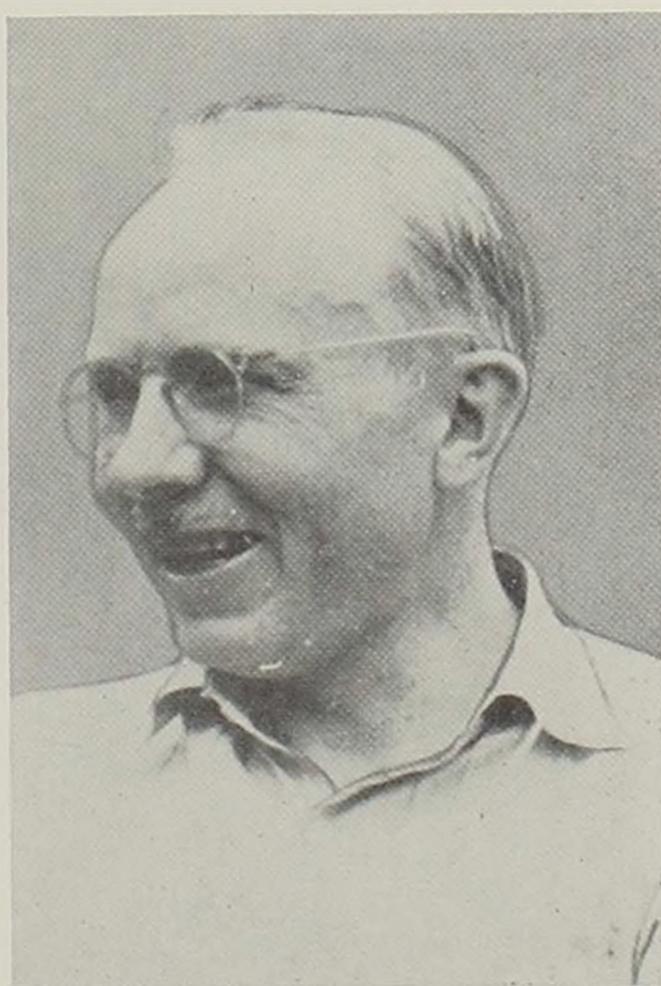
PHIL STONG  
Keosauqua (1890- )



MACKINLAY KANTOR  
Webster City (1904- )



TOM DUNCAN  
Casey (1905- )



PAUL COREY  
Shelby County (1903- )



J. HYATT DOWNING  
Granville (1888- )



ELISABETH FORD  
Mt. Vernon (1893-1944)



MARTIN YOSELOFF  
Sioux City (1919- )



HARTZELL SPENCE  
Clarion (1908- )

and people came to her for roses for the graduation exercises and for snowballs on Decoration Day. No kind of domestic crisis daunted her. . . . She would have been ashamed not to be found capable in any purely human emergency.

The close relation of town and farm is almost universally present in Miss Suckow's work: as social contrast or conflict, as economic interdependence, or as mere physical nearness. Sarah, of *The Bonney Family*, "was possessed with a desire to get out to the open road beyond the streetcar tracks, where she could feel the wind cold against her face and see the dark, moist country look of the shocked corn." In the two thousand words of the story, "Retired" (*Iowa Interiors*), she has achieved the finest portrayal of the retired farmer in all American literature. She has seen more clearly than any other writer the recurring dramatic situation, within Iowa families, of contrasts and conflicts between those who stay on the farm and those who leave it, and has treated it more thoroughly, with many variations of character and incident: most fully in *The Folks*, but also with especial poignancy in *New Hope* and in such stories as "A Rural Community" and "Four Generations."

The modification, external and internal, of Iowa towns and cities by commercial and industrial changes is rarely a major theme in Miss Suckow's work, but it is not neglected. Sarah Bonney, re-

turning to *Morning Sun* after World War I, finds many changes:

. . . stretches of new paving, stucco houses of a very modern quaintness, a chain store with a brilliant red front in place of Anderson's old grocery on Main Street. . . . Fourteenth Street dresses, cheaply up to date and slightly askew at the seams, in the windows long sacred to bolts of "reliable" linen. Cars were parked thick round the court house, and people no longer took leisurely summer outings on the river. There was only one old row-boat for hire.

As social history, then, Miss Suckow's work is more inclusive than it would seem at first; and it is always and wholly authentic. But "sharply set in time and place" as her people unfailingly are, they are also unfailingly "treated as eternal souls." To grasp this truth with some fullness is to begin to measure the achievement of Ruth Suckow as a writer.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

## The Nineteen Thirties

*Phil Stong*

Phil Stong — whose contribution was of major importance in the 1930's — has the distinction among our Iowa writers of having returned to the same town again and again in successive novels and stories, until it has acquired through accretion of character and incident an assured and vigorous individual reality. His "Pittsville" is broadly sketched in *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*:

There were only a thousand people in Pittsville, but the town was scattered — four houses on a block a hundred yards square seemed crowded. This was not true, of course, in the six blocks of Water Street, where fifty or sixty business houses were crowded into the desirable space close to where the founders had thought the teeming docks of river traffic would grow up. They had thought that ninety years before, when the railroad was an amusing but dangerous and expensive trick.

The economic life of Pittsville is presented more fully by Stong than is that of any other Iowa town in fiction. In *Career* (1936) we have a general store treated almost as a character in its own right, with the rows of ledgers that concretize its relation to the community over a period of almost a century:

They were large, squarish books, stoutly bound; the Kreugers had all been large, squarish people, stoutly bound. . . . Ray had seen these books all his life, but now, suddenly, since he had participated in the closing of one of them, he was struck with awe at their antiquity. "1844." He took out the first one gingerly. "Gee, Dad, do you know you could write out a history of the town from these ledgers?"

In this novel Stong is writing about the crucial period in the history of Iowa small towns, that of the triumph of the automobile; and nowhere has the immediate impact of that change been more adequately expressed.

It was a novel primarily of farm life, *State Fair* (1932), that won Phil Stong his first general fame. The close relation between the farm and the small town is prominent in many of his books. The storekeeper, here a generalized, almost mythic figure, is a "point of reference" character in *State Fair*. Farm families, possessed of wealth and marked by a sense of community responsibility which ties them closely to small town life, are the dramatic centers of *The Long Lane* (1939) and of *Village Tale* (1934); in the latter novel the tiny village of Brunswick, definitely located as near Pittsville and also on the river, affords the specific setting. Speculation in farm land is a dramatic factor in *Career*, which includes the detailed technique of a crooked land deal, and the havoc wrought in the community by a bank failure which is the result of land speculation. Albert Brubaker,

of *The Long Lane*, lives on a large and prosperous farm which his family has owned for generations, but has an insurance business in Pittsville and is County Treasurer. This book holds something, though not so much as one could wish, of the special atmosphere of the rural courthouse, and gives a hearty and fairly veracious sampling of county politics.

In *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*, Stong recognizes the social stratification of Pittsville:

There were very definite social lines between the River Rats, Courthouse Hill, Nigger Hill, the Schoolhouse Top, South Pittsville, and the center of the town. All these things in a town of less than a thousand people.

He does not, however, get "het up" about it as do some of the other writers who deal with Iowa small towns. He is, rather, amused by it, and he is aware of the essential fluidity of the lines so drawn, their susceptibility to modification under the impact of personality: this is, indeed, the essential theme of *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow*. When Slaughter Somerville of *Village Tale* resists the attempt of Lulu Drury to seduce him — in one of Stong's not infrequent incidents that are somewhat less than convincing — his rejection of the girl is due not to her status as "river rat" but to her personal depravity and to his allegiance to another woman — who is also of lower status.

Stong's best realized characters are boys and girls. He always treats childhood with insight and

sympathy, and probably his finest achievement is Kenneth Brubaker of *The Long Lane* as Stong follows him through the ordeal of adjustment following the desertion of their home by his mother — to marry an uncle whom the boy has especially loved. It is in part the employment of Kenneth's point of view in his first visit to Des Moines, where Albert Brubaker, his father, finds solace in business and new friends, that enables Stong to give to that city the only really lively and substantial portrayal it has received in our fiction. The genuineness of Kenneth, too, imparts greater vitality and convincingness to the feminine characters of *The Long Lane*. His mother, and especially the star actress of the Des Moines stock company (who becomes his stepmother) achieve stronger delineation than most women in Stong's novels. With few exceptions — among them the venomous Lulu Drury — they are easy to forget. Stong's males have a general penchant for physical violence. They thrive on mayhem — aristocrats and river rats alike — and almost unfailingly become involved, before their stories end, in prodigious battles.

Bright veins of the romantic permeate the substance of Phil Stong's fiction. They appear both in his conception of character and in the patterns and incidents in which his characters are displayed. The accepted obligation to tell a good story leads him again and again to dependence on

melodrama, to arbitrary manipulation of action, to loss of conviction. But what matters most about Stong is that he *cares* about Pittsville and its people. He likes them. That, the reader never doubts. Robust, salty, varied, his fiction unfailingly has the dimension of sympathy, the larger truth that comes from love.

*MacKinlay Kantor*

There are few pictures of an Iowa small town anywhere in our fiction equal to this, in MacKinlay Kantor's *The Jaybird* (1932):

Shortly before dusk, they walked into the town of Carington. It consisted of several hundred small houses, each with its garden and woodsheds and shrubbery, clustering around the brick core of the courthouse square. The silver-green wave of sleeping oats came licking up to the outer skin of the town on the north, and on the south the long, timbered ridges fell away toward the plum-colored haze of Missouri. . . .

They sat on a bench with a warped, wooden back, under the elms beside the old brick courthouse. They faced the north side of the square, where most of the better stores seemed to be — two restaurants, a drug store, a pool hall. Far away across the grass, on their right, was a livery barn and a lumberyard; and on the left side of the square was a dilapidated row of frame structures — a few stores and more empty buildings. There were many robins yodeling in the trees overhead, and at the edge of the wide street was a hitching rack where horses and buggies waited for people.

Possibly Kantor's best treatment of Iowa is in his autobiographical *But Look, the Morn*; but *The*

*Jaybird* has been a remembered favorite of mine ever since its appearance. Its somewhat far-fetched story — of a small boy and his hard-drinking, fife-toting, G.A.R. grandfather tramping and hitchhiking across Iowa — has both exuberance and tenderness. Alone among our works of fiction it does justice to what I knew as a truly distinctive aspect of small town life fifty years ago: Decoration Day, “a great holiday in Clay City, this day of graves,” with the stores closing and the parade to the cemetery, the speeches, the fife and drum corps, the Women’s Relief Corps. Kantor renders it all accurately and without derision. Kantor’s Clay City, like Stong’s Pittsville, is viewed through no rose-colored glasses; but it is viewed with humor, and portrayed with gusto, with candor, and with adequate good will.

More recently Kantor has used Iowa small towns as settings for a series of novelettes or long short stories — a form for which he has a special liking and one in which he has done some of his best work. The first of this series was *Valedictory* (1939): the story of commencement night for the class of 1922 at the Shelldrake, Iowa, High School, told from the point of view of Ty Morley, the high school janitor who has loved the youngsters and his work and is now to be retired. It is a story marked by warmth and kindness as well as by a vivid sense of the place and the event. Selective? Yes. Another writer could have looked at

the same occasion and seen nothing but ugliness: the strain of jealousy, concealed guilt, and faithful service unappreciated. Kantor has shown elsewhere in his work an abundant ability to recognize and deal with ugly aspects of life. A great realist would present both sides, no doubt. But there is a place in good fiction for the honest sentiment that marks *Valedictory* and its successors. In *Happy Land* (1943), it is "Hartfield, Iowa" in which we spend a fateful day: the day that brings to the proprietor of Marsh's Drug Store and his wife the news that their only son has been killed in battle. This story is especially rich in sound details of setting. We are with Mr. Marsh "in front of the kind old house, halting for a moment to listen to a mourning-dove up in that big maple somewhere." The most recent of the Iowa-focused novelettes of MacKinlay Kantor is *God and My Country* (1954), a quiet but memorable story of a scoutmaster in a small Iowa city — through him, of the whole community which he helps to shape.

*Thomas W. Duncan*

Thomas W. Duncan's most substantial treatment of the Iowa scene, in his *Gus the Great*, did not appear until 1947. But ten years earlier, in *We Pluck This Flower*, Duncan had pictured sharply the hotel that is a feature of every small Iowa city:

On the North Side of Main Street, Hotel Baker's plate-

glass windows and line of sidewalk chairs and red stone facade welcomed them into a dark lobby: leather seats encircling iron pillars; an oil painting of fish spilling from a basket; the Rotary emblem above the desk pigeonholes; the soggy register; the scratchy pen.

He had given his heroine an emotional thrill that very many Iowans have felt:

She had never been in Des Moines. When she saw the gold dome of the capitol gleaming in the early sun a surge of odd emotion clogged her throat, for it seemed somehow heroic that the capitol should be standing on a hill where less than a century before only Indian wigwams were pitched beneath tall clouds.

Duncan's writing has a good deal of the force and pungency of Stong's; but there is a fundamental difference in the attitudes of the two men toward their material. At bottom, as I have noted before, Stong is fond of his characters and the places where they live. He likes people — he has relish even for bad people; and he likes Iowa even when he laughs at something Iowan. It is otherwise with Duncan. The first part of *We Pluck This Flower* seems to have been written chiefly as an exposé of small-college social politics. The reader shares, throughout the book, what appears to be the author's controlled dislike for the heroine and nearly all the other characters.

The story line of *Gus the Great* is as vagabond and peripatetic as is the circus which affords some of its best atmosphere, and the book is as richly

varied in its numerous cast of sharply individualized people as is the big show itself. Backgrounds of town and city are only incidental in this book, treated with no major purpose to portray or satirize, but two are firmly established. The best is "Clayton Junction," "a smoky railroad town, a junction point . . . old and down-at-heels." Towns dominated by the railroad, junction points and division points, are a part of Iowa. Usually they have had a Mahoney's Saloon, as does Clayton Junction. It is doubtful that they have often given quite such melodramatic attention to pregnancy out of wedlock as Clayton Junction gives Doll Burgoyne, or that many of them have had newspapermen like the one who, immediately upon rescuing Doll from a mob of children, advises her to read Voltaire.

Clayton Junction is adjacent to "Tamarack" (the relation suggests Marion-Cedar Rapids, as does the dendrological name of the larger town). Tamarack, however, never emerges from Duncan's pages as a felt place, though there is lively observation in the stage setting for one sequence:

As for the house itself, a great service would have been done the Tamarack scene if the architect who designed it had been hit over the head with a hammer soon after birth. But that had not occurred, so out of the civilization of the moustache cup and the celluloid collar the house came into being. Upon the observer's retina it created the impression of simultaneously sprawling and towering. Around two sides of the house ran a veranda whose roof was supported

by pillars as spindling as a spinster's leg, with a froth of wooden lace at the thigh. At either end of the house great wooden watchtowers rose, embrasured with round-bellied bay windows, and topped by roofs looking like enormous dunce caps.

This sketch attests to both Duncan's observation and his cleverness. We have all seen this mansion — in some one of a score of Iowa cities — and we recognize it with due tribute to the author's hilarity. But seemingly this effort exhausted his interest, for no other scene in Tamarack rises more than feebly and vaguely from the page. The fine opportunity offered by the amusement park which affords background for a number of incidents is ignored; the Commercial Club draws only the most tenuous breath of life. The vitality of the novel — which is abundant — resides in the characters; but these are for the most part exotic, exceptional, with little of authentic dramatic relationship to the communities they passingly inhabit.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

## The Nineteen Forties

*J. Hyatt Downing*

It was not until the state was approaching its centenary that an Iowan accepted the major challenge of Iowa history to writers: in 1940 and 1941 J. Hyatt Downing published *Sioux City* and *Anthony Trant*, two volumes of a single novel in which the social and economic history of an Iowa city is deliberately and extensively used to provide functional background for personal drama.

The story bridges three generations. It begins with Dr. Trant, a physician who has endeared himself to the people of the pioneer town of Sioux City and especially to the farm people far around, and who dies during Sioux City's "boom period" of the 1880's. His son, Anthony, is the major figure of the long novel; and Anthony's career is a tragedy of misplaced ambition, of confused values. Wealth is what he lives for, sacrificing to it his love for Mavis Garnett, the firmly realized "feminine lead" of this soundly dramatic novel.

The chance for easy money and lots of it, which lies open to the son of the respected physician in the time of the city's rapid and speculative expansion, contributes to Anthony's following of a wrong direction in his life. But the real reason lies

deeper: Downing is too good a novelist to be a social determinist. His central character remains in some degree a mystery even to his creator — as is true of all really sound fiction. Yet there is no lack of human actuality in Anthony. He becomes for the reader a real person while at the same time the rapidly growing Sioux City holds a similar lively reality. We actually hear things happening:

And all day long, even into the night, the sound of hammers and the loud voices of masons could be heard working on the new business structures which were running up on Fourth Street. . . .

Sioux City was again moving forward. Cudahy had erected a large packing plant; a linseed oil factory had begun operations; soap, candy, mattress factories had started turning out their products; and there was a growing wholesale trade.

Downing's finest picture of Sioux City, however, is one which shows the city undergoing a depression, and one in which the magnificent physical setting is suggested:

. . . Jackson street as it fell away sharply from the high upper bench to the valley of the Missouri where Fourth Street, cluttered and shabby, ran its length. Far off a white mist was rolling down the huge trough of the river, and the Nebraska hills were vague and indistinct. The sky was a soiled gray, impenetrable as slate and closely cramped to the vague horizons. . . . Some raggletag houses were perched on the steep declivity, their blank eyes staring out into the murk of a fading winter afternoon.

I am in danger, however, of overemphasizing

the part played in Downing's work by description of the city and by social history in general. Actually his interest is in people, as the true novelist's must always be. Though his work is unique in our field in its utilization of a long span of a city's life, this historical material is wholly subordinated to and integrated with the human drama of Anthony Trant and those about him. Among the most interesting and attractive of these other characters is Major Gavin, a friend of his father's who remains a friend to Anthony even though he deplors his money worship and joins Mavis Garnett in fruitless effort to wean him from it. These two, in their relations to Anthony, provide the sustained dramatic elements of the novel. Beyond its very substantial value as social history, Downing's work is marked by genuine literary skill.

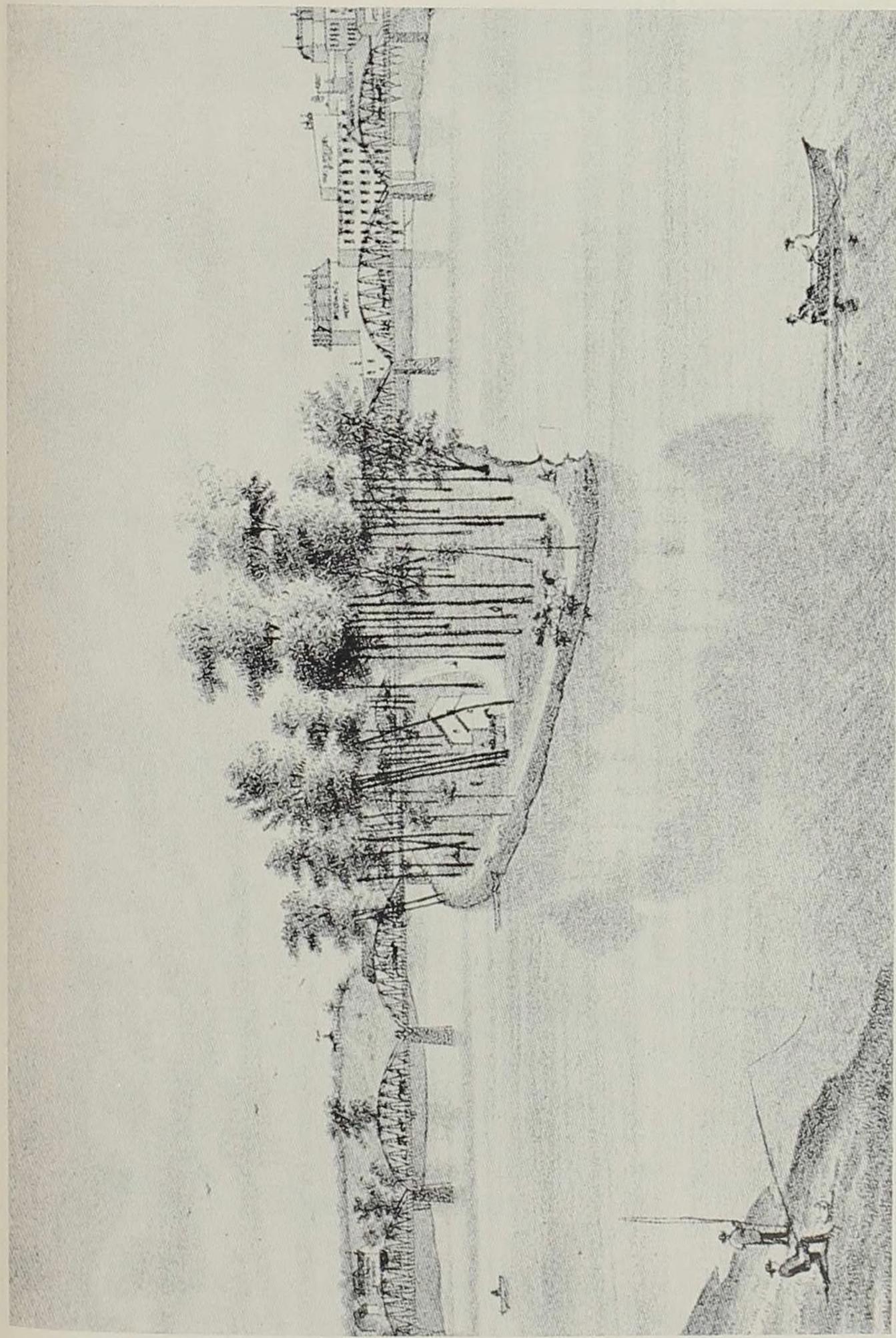
*Elisabeth Ford*

Perhaps there was something conducive to a long-range view of Iowa community life in the perspective afforded by the end of the 1930's. Elisabeth Ford's *No Hour of History*, also published in 1940, is another novel of a long life which presents much of Iowa's social history. Its central character, Virginia Ash, born in Iowa just before the Civil War and living until 1927, bridges with her life a period roughly parallel to that measured by the career of Anthony Trant. Born to wealth, Virginia Ash travels, and knows famous people.

But the richly woven texture of her everyday life in a small Iowa city seems to engage the chief interest of the writer, and the character is in some degree submerged in accurate but overabundant detail which pictures vividly one limited phase of Iowa life for most of a century.

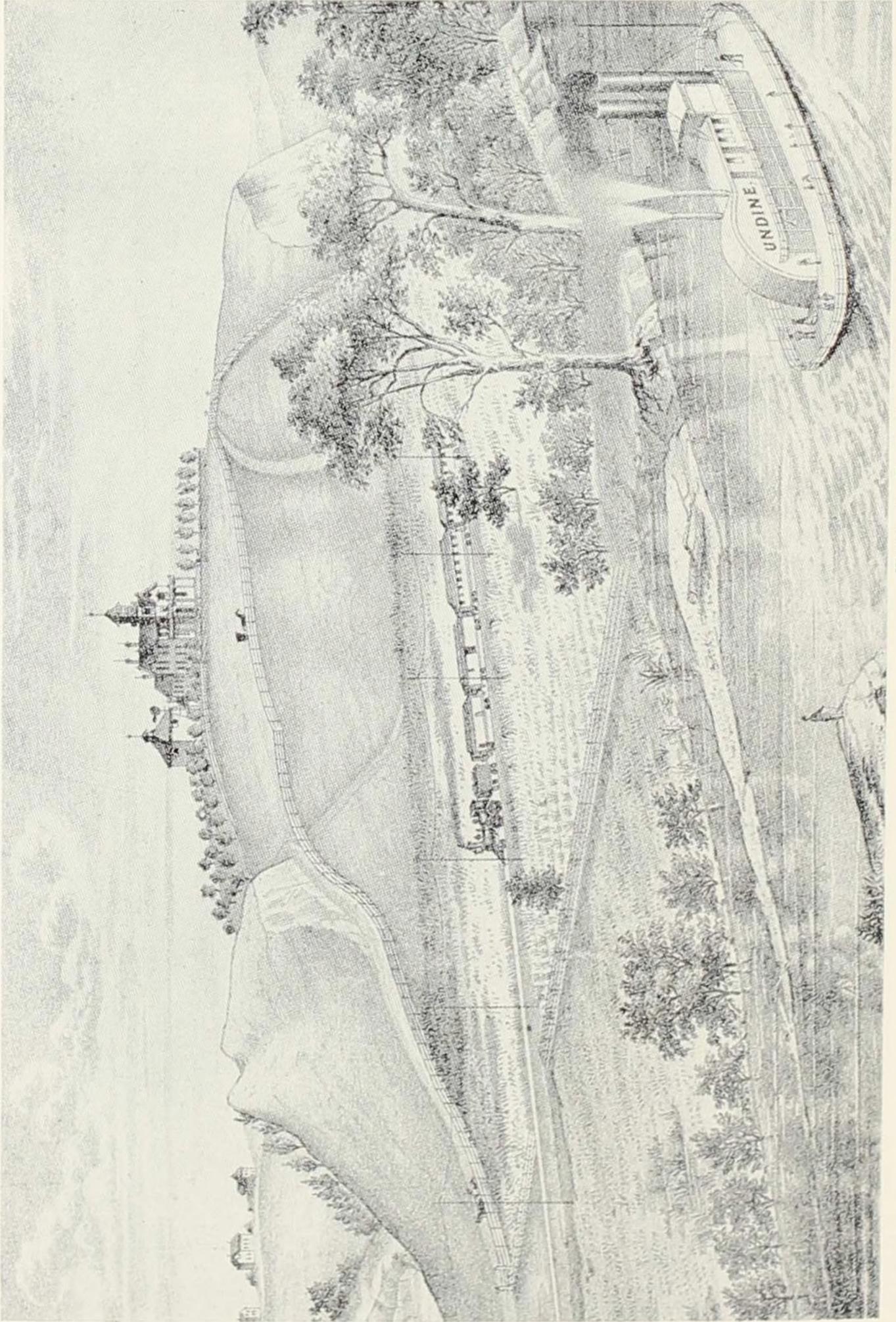
Miss Ford's later novel, *Amy Ferraby's Daughter* (1944), is definitely more dramatic, with class distinctions in the Iowa town of Prairie Grove as the dominant factor of conflict. Amy Ferraby, born an aristocrat and brought to Iowa by an adoring young husband, never forgets her childhood home and never comes to terms with Prairie Grove, which she hates. Her daughter, Caroline, grows up loving the Ferrabys' man of all work but too proud to marry him, fine person though he is in every way but that of social status.

Amy Ferraby's pride ruins her husband's life as well as her daughter's, for she insists on his selling his milling business — which he loves and in which he is successful — because she cannot bear to be a miller's wife. Though the background is nowhere emphasized, the book is rich in details that ring true for the reader with an Iowa background of the period toward the last century's end: crabapple and lilac, spring house-cleaning, the institution of the oyster supper. Some of the characters have marked vitality and firm individuality, notably Judge Rutherford and his daughter Harriet, Caroline's best friend. But the reader



—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*

Cedar River, the Island, and Portion of Cedar Rapids



—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*

Suburban Sioux City Showing Missouri and Floyd Rivers

who is familiar with the social history of Iowa towns will find it less than probable that "Prairie Grove had a caste system as relentless as that of India," and will conclude that Miss Ford has overdramatized this element in her material.

*Paul Corey*

In *County Seat* (1941) Paul Corey applied a fictional technique in the presentation of an Iowa town similar to that of his *Three Miles Square*. This book is the third volume of the trilogy of the Mantz family, and the Widow Mantz (who has moved to town but still owns the farm) and her sons and daughter are the major figures.

An ingenious device provides a panoramic view of the town for the novel's beginning: from the clock tower of the county courthouse, where repairs are in progress. Thereafter we go into each section and into every group and social level of the community. Complete inclusiveness like that of *Three Miles Square* is impossible, of course, for this county seat town of four thousand people; but the sampling is broad and judicious. It is a period of extreme tensions in Iowa towns of which Corey writes — the years of the 1920's, of prohibition, of depression on the farms and feverish speculation in the cities. Characteristic economic aspects of the time are spotlighted and validly dramatized through Corey's method: Otto Mantz has a garage and filling station, and could prosper if he

managed his expanding business efficiently. Verney Mantz's husband is a trucker, always on the edge of poverty from which rum-running rescues him temporarily. The tenant on the Mantz farm is unable to meet his rent, and other farm owners in the neighborhood are piling up debts.

Social stratification is a factor in *County Seat*, but the emphasis is on mobility: one of the best-realized characters is a boy who is sent to the reform school, but later becomes prosperous and makes a socially advantageous marriage. Strong and effective emphasis is laid on the vast importance of competition — keeping up with the Jones's — in the middle group of this fluid society. It is dramatized in the excessive and irrational demand of Marie, Otto Mantz's wife, for a new house that will mean social prestige, and the effect of this ambition on Otto's business.

One gets fairly tired of the Mantzes before the book is over — especially of the Widow with her fiercely selfish ambition centered solely on her youngest son. Their lives have a tremendous veracity, even to the adored youngest son's escape from his mother to a second-rate job in Chicago from which he returns when depression strikes. The story of the Mantzes, however, is not quite sufficiently dramatic to energize fully the whole substance of the book, with its many remotely extended complications and remotely related characters. So far as the Mantzes are concerned, *County*

*Seat* is dependent on its predecessors in the trilogy, *Three Miles Square* and *The Road Returns*. But it has integration as a portrayal of the town itself. Nowhere else in our fiction is there a study of an Iowa town so deliberately inclusive and representative, so accurate in observation, and so honestly put down.

*Hartzell Spence*

To this period belong the two deservedly popular Iowa books of Hartzell Spence, *One Foot in Heaven* (1940), and *Get Thee Behind Me* (1942). Although these books have all the appeal and much of the effect of good fiction, and although their portrayal of Iowa town life is exceptionally lively and acute, they belong in a strict sense to the fields of biography and autobiography, and for this reason I shall not consider them here.

*Martin Flavin*

The Harper Prize novel of 1943 — *Journey in the Dark*, by Martin Flavin — is an Iowa novel (at least fore and aft: amidship its setting is Chicago). Interestingly, its theme closely parallels that of J. Hyatt Downing's story of Anthony Trant: the "Dark" of the title is a confusion of ideals, a wrong direction in the journey of life; and it results from the equation of happiness with wealth. The motivation of the book is different from that of Downing's, however, and superficially viewed it is more adequate. Sam Braden, the

central character of Flavin's novel, is born "on the wrong side of the tracks" in "Wyattville," a little town definitely located as on the Mississippi a few miles below Muscatine. His ne'er-do-well father has a permanent job as town marshal; he is brave enough, but lazy and stupid. The boy's mother is of aristocratic birth and breeding, but is a person vastly different from Elisabeth Ford's Amy Fer-raby. It is not her fault that Sam becomes the vic-tim of confused values. She manages and largely supports the family.

When Sam comes to a belated realization of what it means to be poor, he resolves to be rich — and to marry Eileen Wyatt, who lives in the big house with the iron fence around it. Once more the social stratification of the small town is posited as affording the major character and the book their chief motivation. After a period of money-making in Chicago, and a briefer period of unhappy mar-riage to the aristocratic (and unfaithful) Eileen, Sam returns to Wyattville to build a tremendous show place with his money.

The period covered is some sixty years, from the 1880's to the Second World War — which af-fords elements that may have influenced the selec-tion of this novel for the Harper Prize in 1943. Its best portions, however, are those dealing with Sam's boyhood. His mother, the Negro neighbor girl with whom he has his first sexual experience, and — above all the rest — his callous and unam-

bitious father, all these are delineated memorably. The treatment of the town as background is dominated by Flavin's emphasis on class distinctions and opposition, but this involves an excellent if somewhat extravagant picture of a small town's eccentric rich man, the father of Eileen Wyatt.

*Martin Yoseloff*

Martin Yoseloff's *No Greener Meadows* (1946) and *The Family Members* (1948) have a single small Iowa city as setting, though it is called Stone City in the first and Rock Centre in the second. I have made no effort to identify the actual setting of these stories: it is not the real Stone City, for it is a place of some twenty thousand people, with a Y.M.C.A., a good library, and a junior college. It is a pleasure to round out our survey with attention to books as good as these. More than in any other works we have examined except Paul Corey's, an Iowa community as such is fully realized and is dramatically functional in these two books. This is true not of physical aspects of the town primarily, though the look and feel of streets and classrooms and offices are ably rendered when they are called for. It is rather the texture of social relationships through which Yoseloff reveals his community — the complex of attitudes and conduct of many characters centering in each case around a single family.

Perhaps *No Greener Meadows* should be reck-

oned as autobiography rather than as fiction, for it is written in the first person and tells the story of a boy's life from the age of six through his years at the junior college: his successive teachers and schoolmates, neighbors, employers, the "Y," and the high school. The emphasis throughout this record is on the friendliness and open-heartedness of people; the total portrayal is sympathetic.

There is no doubt that *The Family Members* is a novel. Its central character is F. M. Hollenbeck, the general secretary of the Y.M.C.A. at Rock Centre (who appears under another name in the earlier book); and its dramatic core is his discovery and eventual acceptance of the fact that his daughter, Lorraine, is going to have an illegitimate child. This book displays markedly firm characterization. Especially consistent and impressive is the treatment of Agnes, Lorraine's foster sister, and Cecil, her brother. The small city background against which this domestic drama is played out is set down with true realism, without satire or enmity and without glossing or softening. The texture of high school life, for example, is established without undue effort or emphasis and in a distinctly satisfying degree of adequacy. This book does for the Iowa town something a little different from anything provided elsewhere in the record we have studied. Martin Yoseloff's work is a valuable portrayal of the Iowa town in fiction.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

## A Word in Conclusion

From the days of Hamlin Garland and Octave Thanet to those of Martin Yoseloff stretch more than fifty years of effort, by a score of competent writers, to record the life of Iowa towns and cities in fiction. Major aspects of our Iowa life — the relation between town and farm, between rich and poor, between tradition and innovation — have been explored sensitively and illuminated thoughtfully. The significant tensions resulting from economic changes have been faithfully reflected in the dramatic terms of family fortunes and personal problems. It is clear that this body of fiction has unique and lasting value as social history to the people of the state. In its variety, its concreteness, its insight, it can never be matched by formal chronicle or scholarly history. Without it our cultural heritage, our understanding of the present, and our appreciation of the past would be immeasurably impoverished.

It is our peculiar good fortune that some of those who have dealt with the Iowa scene in fiction have been able to see in the particularity of life in an Iowa town or city the universal in human experience, and to share that vision with appropriate grace and power. In these cases we have not only

social history but literature in the true sense, fiction that holds value for readers far beyond our bordering rivers and our moment in time.

I am grateful for the richness of our fiction, and for its not infrequent high achievement, as all readers of it must be. It has been a privilege to review it in this fashion. Yet as I complete the study I cannot but be aware of the great gaps in the record, the inviting and challenging themes as yet untouched, the areas of experience, of place and action, as yet unexplored. Perhaps most strikingly apparent is our lack of adequate fictional treatment of some of our cities that possess most dramatic physical settings and great richness of historical background: Dubuque, Council Bluffs, Clinton, Keokuk. And where is the worthy novel of the small town doctor, the small town lawyer, the small town editor? Clearly there is no danger that Iowa writers will run out of material — and, I humbly trust, no danger that Iowa will run out of writers.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

# FICTION WITH AN IOWA BACKGROUND

Compiled by Luella M. Wright

Associate Professor, State University of Iowa

- Aldrich, Bess Streeter**  
The Cutters (1926)  
A Lantern In Her Hand (1928)  
Miss Bishop (1933)  
The Man Who Caught The Weather (1936)  
Mother Mason (1939)  
Song of Years (1939)  
Journey Into Christmas (1949)
- Brigham, Johnson**  
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- Engle, Paul**  
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- Erickson, Howard**  
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- Sigmund, J. G.**  
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