

Iowa's Phil Stong

My first contact with the writing of Phil Stong came over thirty years ago, when he sent me a story for publication in the old *Midland*. The most recent was my review of his new book, *Gold in Them Hills*, in my department in *The Rotarian* for November, 1957. In the years between I followed his writings as they appeared, gave them special study in articles for THE PALIMPSEST, and came to know him personally through too infrequent meetings and through the letters into which he put so much of himself.

Philip Duffield Stong was born at Keosauqua, Iowa, in 1899. Twenty years later he was graduated from Drake University. There followed a dozen years of preparation for his career as a professional writer: half spent in teaching, first at a Kansas high school and later at his alma mater; and half in journalism. Meanwhile he was writing, with increasing devotion and determination. When success came at last it came suddenly: *State Fair* (1932) was a best-selling novel and became a famous motion picture, and its author within a few months was a nationally known writer.

In the twenty-five years of his professional ca-

reer, Phil Stong published some forty volumes. Naturally, not all of these were of first quality. Indeed, looking back over them, I wonder whether any single volume represented the very best of which Phil Stong was capable; probably not — few writers of whatever stature have ever reached their highest possible achievement. But these books were marked unfailingly by positive qualities which were characteristic of their maker; and their impressive totality establishes Phil Stong as the most prolific of Iowa's major writers.

Included in the forty volumes are a dozen books written especially for children and young readers. The qualities which always marked Stong's fiction included some which were admirably suited to writing for young readers — qualities of fantasy, humor, and vigorous narrative. Phil's juveniles have given pleasure, quite literally, to millions of children — and will continue to do so.

I did not wholly like *State Fair*. I prized the brilliant rendering of the state fair setting and atmosphere and the integrity of the minor characters — not forgetting the prizewinning boar, Blue Boy, one of the most famous animals in American literature. I enjoyed the unfailing vitality of the narration. But I could not recognize in the young man and woman who are the central characters just the kind of Iowa boys and girls who go to the state fair with prizewinning livestock.

Perhaps Stong was at his best in characters and

events slightly larger than life — in other words, in some degree romanticized — combined with a solid foundation of firmly realized and accurately conceived setting, atmosphere, and minor characters. In two of his finest books, *Buckskin Breeches* (1937) and *Ivanhoe Keeler* (1939), this treatment was admirably suited to the material. These adventurous romances of the midwestern frontier are brilliant in color and incident, fast-moving in vigorous action, memorable in style and in knowable and lovable people. I have found them eminently rewarding in rereading, and I predict that they will continue to delight American readers for generations to come.

But Phil Stong did not require the support of romantic conception of character in order to produce readable and memorable fiction. The several novels in which he portrayed the area of his own boyhood — among them *Village Tale* (1934), *The Rebellion of Lennie Barlow* (1937), and *The Long Lane* (1939) — are essentially realistic in their total effect, and constitute one of the most impressive and valuable fictional interpretations of an Iowa community thus far achieved. Yet they are marked unfailingly by Stong's peculiar power of exciting the reader's interest: a power derived in part from Stong's freshness of vision, and in part from his audacity of phrasing — often with the effect of wry, sometimes of broad, humor. In all these books a per-

vading and decisive factor is Stong's deep feeling for the Iowa land itself — unobtrusive, even reticent, in expression, yet urgent, intense, profound. It is this quality which most links his work with that of such other Iowa writers as Ruth Suckow, Walter J. Muilenburg, James Hearst, and Jay G. Sigmund.

I am tempted to wish that Phil Stong had written more non-fiction, for he wrote it very well. His ability to see things from a fresh point of view and to tell what he saw in fresh phrasing served him well in the fields of history and biography. In his fine first venture in this field, *Horses and Americans* (1939), he paid tribute to the part played by the horse in American history, and expressed thereby the wistful interest that anyone born in rural Iowa before 1900 must feel. In *Hawkeyes — A Biography of the State of Iowa* (1940) and *If School Keeps* (1940) he displayed the quality suggested by the subtitle of his last non-fiction book, *Gold in Them Hills: Being an Irreverent History of the Great 1849 Gold Rush* (1957). Irreverent these books are, perhaps, but in no raffish sense. They are marked by sharp insights and incisive expression. They are books that do not stop with description of externals, but provoke thought about essentials.

Phil Stong's achievement is based on far more substantial grounds than mere productiveness. He was the first Iowan to produce a nationally

popular novel built around such a typical mid-western institution as the state fair. He was the first to create adequate, colorful and memorable fictional treatment of the trek to Iowa and the beginnings of settlement. He was the first to portray in a group of several novels a representative small Iowa community in its entirety — its business and professional life, its people of town and of farm. He was one of the few to see that in Iowa's relatively brief history there is rich material for regiments of novelists. The whole body of his work is marked by and expressive of a personality singularly rich, frank and generous, full of love of life.

In reviewing Phil Stong's last book in *The Rotarian* last month, I wrote of *Gold in Them Hills*: "If you have ever read anything by Phil Stong (as you probably have), you will know what I mean when I say that his writing is always alive — very much alive: which is after all the cardinal virtue, is it not, if we stop to think?" I did not know of Phil Stong's death when I wrote these words; it seems to me now that they possess an unintended double meaning. For it is the mystery and wonder of writing that words once alive do not die. Books which truly breathe the breath of life, as Phil Stong's do, outlive their creator. They continue to delight, to illuminate, to refresh and strengthen, through the years and through the generations.

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