

THE PALIMPSEST

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Fiction as History

The conservative historian, or as one critic has designated him the honest-to-God historian, confines himself solely to official records and legislative enactments. His germane relative, the social historian, allows himself more leeway, and welcomes personal letters and diaries as contributing agencies to his knowledge of the past.

The writer of fiction, especially if he entertains a bias toward history, desires to embody truths of human life in a setting which records of the past or observations of his own times have made clear to him. He plays a treble role. He must familiarize himself with documents, legislative decrees, and authenticated weather reports, and he must steep himself in old letters and recollections, in folklore and diaries, and in newspaper items. Then, with imaginative insight, he must breathe life into the past through his characters, who speak the language of the past, and dramatize their lives against a chosen historical background.

If such a writer of fiction has mastered his source material, possesses insight into human motives, and has the ability to tell a good story, he too can make a lasting contribution to the history of his region. Drop from literature, for instance, Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and the world is deprived of much knowledge concerning chivalry; drop the trilogy of Herbert Quick from the fiction of Iowa and the State loses realistic pictures of its development.

Iowa has been fortunate in the interpreters of her past. Writers, such as Herbert Quick, have felt the spirit of the pioneers and shared in their building of the State; and other writers, such as Ruth Suckow, with the appraising eye of the social historian, have been keen observers of contemporaneous history in its process of unfolding.

The struggle of early Iowa settlers to overcome nature — searing summer heat, biting blizzards that swept across the open prairies, rust in wheat, locusts, and chinch bugs — necessarily precluded much literary writing before 1880. By that time free land had all but disappeared and five railroads had crossed the State with numerous spurs running north or south to join county seat towns with neighboring villages. Public high schools had almost crowded out the few and scattered private academies. When the nation cele-

brated its centenary in 1876, Iowa with thirty years of statehood behind her became conscious that she too possessed a history.

In the late eighties, the literary East began to show interest in two Iowa writers — Hamlin Garland and Alice French. Although Wisconsin claims Hamlin Garland because he was born in that State, and Illinois because he made Chicago his home for many years, Iowa also has a right to claim him since she nurtured and educated him from his seventh to his twentieth year. His autobiographical *A Son of the Middle Border* is graphic with the Iowa prairies, with fall plowing, with folksongs learned in log cabins and log schoolhouses, with realistic pictures of overweary and overburdened farm wives and farmers rising in revolt against railroad discriminations and the greed of mortgage-holders.

Garland's short story, "Under the Lion's Paw", in *Main-Travelled Roads*, has become a classic of this period, epitomizing the revolt of the farming population of the Middle West. After depriving the mortgagee and his family of the rewards of three years of sacrifice and backbreaking toil, the owner of the mortgage says in derision, "Why, man, don't look at me like that. Don't take me for a thief. It's the law. The reg'lar thing. Everybody does it."

Three other early novels by Hamlin Garland — *Jason Edwards*, *A Spoil of Office*, and *A Member of the Third House* — deal savagely with graft as it affected the farmers, then wholly unorganized and at the mercy of bankers, railroad magnates, and politicians. An undercurrent of righteous indignation at social injustice found its way into these tales of the Midwest. These stories can still be read as fiction, good stories well told, and as history, which portrays with drab details of mud and numbing toil the contemporary rural history of the 1880's and 1890's. In *Prairie Folks* and *Main-Travelled Roads*, both collections of short stories, Hamlin Garland pictured Iowa barnyards, full of clayey gumbo in spring and dust filled "chuck holes" in summer, farm houses ugly without and inconvenient within, and men and women breaking under low financial returns and the endless routine of farm chores.

Two decades later, Hamlin Garland, after detouring for a time in romance laid in regions as far apart as New York and the Rockies, returned to the Iowa scene with *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917) and the Pulitzer prize-winning *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (1921). Hamlin Garland himself is the hero of the first and his pioneering mother of the second. In these books the bitterness of his earlier short stories and nov-

els has been softened by time; although he never forgot the hardships, the sweat, and the barnyard smells which the "dirt farmer" endured, the artist in him overshot the endless routine of milking, sowing, and plowing, with splashes of winter sunsets, bird life in hazel copses, and the fiddle accompanying the "do-si-do" and the "swing your partners" of the square dances. Without these tales the history of Iowa and its share in the middle border would be much less known in America than it is today.

Before 1910 no Iowa writer was better known in the East than was Alice French, who chose to use the pen name of Octave Thanet because it might pass either as a masculine or feminine name. She belonged to a prominent and wealthy family in Davenport. Her earliest writing, strangely enough for the daughter of an industrialist and a woman of her day, dealt with sociological themes. Several of her stories, published in the *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *Century*, *Lippincott's*, and the *Arena*, show a great sympathy for the laboring man as well as an interest in Iowa's farmers.

A number of Alice French's short stories have been collected in *The Captured Dream*, *A Slave to Duty & Other Women*, *A Book of True Lovers*, and *Stories of a Western Town*. Many of these stories have Iowa backgrounds. Written in a

clear style, they present with humor and excellent characterizations many close-ups of the beginnings of industrial life in Iowa before the tempo of living had been accelerated by Model T Fords, tractors, and combines.

Perhaps her best story is "The Besetment of Kurt Lieders" from her *Stories of a Western Town*. The scene is laid in Davenport in the 1880's and the story deals with a serious crisis in the life of an old German cabinetmaker, Kurt Lieders, who loved his craft but found it almost impossible to find his niche in the regimentation demanded by a change of management in the plant. He is saved from "doing himself to death" only by the efforts of his clumsy peasant wife, Thekla, who, with surprising resourcefulness, bargains shrewdly with the new employer.

Although born in 1861, the same year as Hamlin Garland, Herbert Quick came much more slowly into recognition, but no other contribution has equalled the panorama of Iowa history which Herbert Quick presented in his trilogy of *Vandemark's Folly*, *The Hawkeye*, and *The Invisible Woman*. Mrs. Bertha M. Shambaugh in reviewing these books in 1923, called Herbert Quick "the restorer of Iowa palimpsests." He rubbed off the accumulations of the years and took his readers back to pioneering life.

In Quick's case the tragedy of infantile paralysis proved a blessing, for because of it he was permitted to satisfy his craving for books. He owed much to the McGuffey Readers, which he knew "by heart". As a farm boy, a rural teacher, a reporter, a lawyer, an agricultural editor, he knew Iowa's people and their problems at first hand. His earliest novels, *Double Trouble*, *The Broken Lance*, and *The Brown Mouse*, present in fictional form several political problems which affected the village churches and schools and the status of the farmer before the days of the Farm Bureau.

Without the bitterness of the youthful Hamlin Garland, Herbert Quick portrayed the men and women he had known. In Fremont McConkey he relived many of his own experiences, at first near Eldora and later in northwestern Iowa. *Vandemark's Folly* has for its back structure the establishing of township government; *The Hawkeye* depicts the rise of county government and treats in vivid detail of the development of the Populist Party and the Granger Movement; the last of the three, *The Invisible Woman*, with the descendants of Vandemark and his neighbors as chief characters, deals with the graft and political scandals centering about Sioux City.

From Quick's earliest recollections came his de-

scriptions of the untouched prairie and the heat of prairies on fire so vividly portrayed in *Vandemark's Folly*. From his work as reporter and editor came his clear insight into Iowa's problems. This firsthand knowledge of Iowa, its agricultural problems, and political intrigue makes this collection a graphic picture of Iowa history between 1850 and 1900. In these three volumes the reader sees virgin soil being transformed into farms and townsites and the development of trade, transportation, schools, and culture.

Closely related in theme to Quick's *Invisible Woman* are two fairly recent novels from the pen of J. Hyatt Downing, *Sioux City* (1940) and *Anthony Trant* (1941). They deal with the flamboyant period of the eighties when rococo architecture, Victorian fountains, and cast-iron deer adorned the residential districts of Sioux City when this town was "booming" too fast for its own good.

Since Iowa is a State that is largely agricultural, short stories and the novels of farm life have naturally dominated Iowa fiction. Only a few can be singled out for comment. Josephine Donovan's *Black Soil* vividly portrays the life of an improvident Irish pioneer, lovable for his big heart and robust sense of humor, Tim Connor by name, and his wife, Nell Connor, who mothered

Tim as well as the six small Connors and a half-Indian waif. The story, laid in northwestern Iowa, is climaxed by the coming of the railroad. The cricket and locust-ridden farmstead then became the site of a new village and Connor a prosperous promoter.

Margaret Wilson's *The Able McLaughlins*, the Harper prize-winning novel for 1923, and its sequel, *The Law and the McLaughlins*, present a dramatic portrayal of Scotch pioneers who settled in Tama County. Margaret Wilson, who belongs to the family of "Tama Jim" Wilson, drew upon family records and reminiscences for the two McLaughlin novels. They give vivid close-ups of a thrifty Scotch colony whose members on occasion took the law in their own hands in order to rout from the country near Tama a body of vicious horse thieves. Humor is supplied by the Scotch housewife who, when her husband refused to build her something better than a floorless cabin and instead bought more land, almost returned to Scotland on money which she had concealed in her muff. "I won't live in a pig sty", she commented when her husband reached the hotel at the moment she was bargaining for stage transportation. The husband capitulated.

Bess Streeter Aldrich has succeeded in making Iowa's past "come alive" in her stories. She di-

vides her major interests between village and farm life. *A Lantern in Her Hand* has its opening chapters in Iowa but its scene is later moved to Nebraska. Against a background of a growing college in a small Iowa town, *Miss Bishop* manages to make a heroine out of a school teacher. *Song of Years* plays upon one theme song, the pioneer virtue of "pullin' through". The hero, Jeremiah Martin, in real life was Zimri Streeter, Mrs. Aldrich's grandfather, a pioneer sheepherder, farmer, and legislator.

"Pullin' through" meant limited diet, the hardships of cold winters, and the Civil War. In gathering her materials, Mrs. Aldrich made a very exhaustive study of old letters, printed and oral recollections of pioneers, and early newspapers. She is unusually accurate in her historical details. Both Bess Streeter Aldrich and Ruth Suckow have utilized the Iowa village, but beyond the village spreads the countryside. This is especially true of Mrs. Aldrich's short stories which center about Ma Mason and Nelle Cutter.

Ruth Suckow frequently unites with her pictures of village life the slow absorption of the German element into the culture of Iowa. One notes this in her depiction of the Kaetterhenrys in *Country People*, but it is also present in *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* and in *The Bonney Fam-*

ily. This mingling of the two cultures is seen also in her short stories. In *Midwestern Primitive*, for example, the German grandmother wears a "mother hubbard" and "waddles" and yet manages to steal attention away from her sophisticated daughter-in-law.

The best known of Ruth Suckow's novels is *The Folks*. In this book she ruthlessly analyzed the home and village life of the Fergusons, who started out with high ideals for their children but finally were forced to accept the hope that their four offspring might possibly do as well as their parents had done. In *The Folks* Ruth Suckow introduces a social study of the early nineteenth century and in the various chapters devoted to the four Ferguson offspring she traces the gradual breakdown of the old ideals of home and church life. Ruth Suckow looks at life, whether it be in Iowa or not, with clear-sighted penetration.

Depicting farm life in the period between 1910 and 1930 Paul Corey has written a trilogy which deals very realistically with the difficulties which farmers in Iowa faced when organization still lay in the offing and with the effect of World War I upon the farmers and their families. Through *Three Miles Square*, *The Road Returns*, and *County Seat* a note of tragedy runs in the character of the Widow Mantz. Better educated than

her neighbors yet much of a peasant at heart, the Widow Mantz met defeat after defeat because she could not induce any of her four children to fill the niches which her ambition had carved for them. In 1946 Paul Corey returned to the Iowa scene with his *Acres of Antaeus*, a story of the depression years, portraying the dire effects of company ownership and management of farms on the lives of Iowa farmers.

Paul Corey knows his farm background material — its grain elevators, its system of threshing grain, its need for organization, and its faulty system of rural education. In his trilogy and in *Acres of Antaeus* he does not paint an inviting picture of rural life in Iowa. Bleak, drab, unsavory details crowd his pages. Although both Garland and Corey made use of the "dirt farmer", the latter lacks the emotional fervor of Hamlin Garland who, when he wrote his *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Prairie Folks*, spoke out of a full and indignant heart and railed against the ills that were breaking his father and mother and their neighbors.

At least three Iowa authors utilized the vantage point of an Iowa parsonage where they saw the riffraff and the pew holder, the unlovely and the "mothers in Zion" pass in and out. In small town parsonages these writers learned of petty

meannesses, of waste and sacrifices of human life, of comic and tragic errors, and of the ambitions and ideals of common people.

The role of the village minister is presented sympathetically in Ruth Suckow's *New Hope*, and both humorously and thoughtfully in Hartzell Spence's *One Foot in Heaven* and in *Get Thee Behind Me*. In Spence's books, back of the omnipresent humor in the depiction of Spence's father, the reader observes a succession of villages with busybodies and interferers, as well as the petty frictions which upset choirs and Sunday schools.

Ethel Hueston's stories of nearly three decades ago, *Prudence of the Parsonage* and *Prudence Says So*, present life from the viewpoint of a Methodist minister's daughter. Interest in these was revived in 1941 when she published *Preacher's Wife*, a partially fictionalized life of her mother and her father. For the most part the scene is laid in small pastorates in southeastern Iowa. Family crises were constantly developing, for the father was not a financier and could not resist a sale, while the mother, on a very limited income, was rearing nearly a dozen children. These stories of ministers' families show very clearly that not all the human problems in the State grew out of agricultural unrest.

Iowa history has found its way into other vari-

eties of fiction. In *Buckskin Breeches*, Phil Stong has told a roistering story of territorial days in Iowa when pioneers, in advance of legal surveys, marked off their claims and organized their own legal procedures. Best known of Stong's many Iowa stories is *State Fair* where the attention is centered on Blue Boy, the prize-winning Hampshire boar.

Charles Russell has used more facts than fiction in his *Raftin' on the Mississip'* in which he has gathered together from recollections of his youth and other sources many tales of the Upper Mississippi River craft and river settlements, as well as old songs, superstitions, and folk lore. In *Doctor — Here's Your Hat!*, Dr. Joseph A. Jerger mingles a plea for the family doctor with an account of his own town and rural practice of medicine in Black Hawk County in the early part of this century.

Also in the debatable land between fact and fiction comes *Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years, 1827-1927*, a record of a courageous woman of New England stock, who transferred her energy and her faith in life to Iowa in 1856. Settling near Fort Madison, she reared a family of eight children. Johnson Brigham, after spending fifteen years as State Librarian and writing his *Iowa — Its History and Its Foremost Citizens*,

was well prepared to put into fictional form his findings concerning the wintering of the dragoons at the second Fort Des Moines in 1843 during Iowa's territorial days. He called his novel *The Sinclairs of Old Fort Des Moines* and utilized Keokuk and the Sauk Indians as prominent characters.

In 1945 Susan Glaspell published *Judd Rankin's Daughter*. In this philosophical novel, the author returns to the Iowa field which she had long neglected. She and her husband, George Cram Cook, spent their youth near Davenport. In two early novels, *The Visioning* (1911) and *The Glory of the Conquered* (1909) and in the early part of the biography of her husband, *The Road to the Temple*, she made use of Iowa backgrounds.

Judd Rankin's Daughter is really the story of Judd Rankin. Fresh from an Iowa farm in the vicinity of Davenport, he attended the University and became an editor in a Mississippi River town. Each week he published an agricultural column in his paper which was widely quoted by other editors. The meaning of agriculture, its relation to Iowa farmers, and their attitudes toward life were constantly recurring themes.

Like Plato, Judd Rankin did not solve these problems of democratic living but he pondered

over them, and like Plato's master, Socrates, he constantly set a series of questions before his readers. Before the close of World War II, Judd Rankin's only grandson is sent home mentally disturbed. His father and mother grieve because they find nothing in their philosophy which will help him.

The boy and his grandfather meet, find that they speak and understand the same language. The closeness of sowing and harvesting to man's needs and a feeling that out of indignation for man's wrongs and action to relieve them came "the song of the earth — clear to heaven", gave the young man the stability he needed. The pages are packed with meaning and, like Bacon's recipe for reading, are to be digested, not casually read.

When Iowans in another century or two wish to recapture the story of Iowa's past, they will be deeply grateful to Herbert Quick for his pictures of the unbroken prairies with its flower and bird life, to Hamlin Garland for his *Main-Travelled Roads*, to Ruth Suckow for her stories of village life, and to the many other novelists and short story writers who have drawn upon Iowa history, Iowa landscapes, and Iowa people for their materials and their characters.

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