

## Exponents of the Pioneers

What do you suppose the hard-headed, practical "newcomers" in the Iowa of the forties would say if we could explain to them to-day, on some Lethe's wharf, that they have become heroes of romance? Perhaps some of them would be well pleased; for, whatever their attitude toward bookish heroes and heroics, doubtless many of them had been moved to undertake the great adventure of Iowa pioneering not only by economic and social reasons but by certain ill-understood stirrings of romance within them. At any rate, here the Iowa pioneer is, arrived with all his train in the realm of Romance. His prairie schooner drawn by oxen, his log-cabin, his claim, his prairie of a thousand variable charms, his founding of government and schools and churches, his "bees", his hunting — all these, because we are proud of the courage and hardihood of our grandfathers and grandmothers, and a little proud of ourselves for having descended from them — all these are to-day transmuted to the very stuff of fable.

Two men of letters stand out as having done distinctive literary service to the Iowa pioneer. They are, of course, Hamlin Garland and Herbert Quick. These two men, though never close friends, were acquaintances over a long period. First brought together by a common enthusiasm for the doctrines of

Henry George in the eighties, they resumed their friendship later, when Quick had begun to write his novels of early Iowa.

The earlier pioneer period is Quick's, by virtue of *Vandemark's Folly*. This excellent novel, published in 1921, is the best literary interpretation of pioneer life in Iowa before the Civil War. It gives such an impression of veracity that many readers, finding it written in the first person, took it for genuine autobiography. Quick penetrated to the center of the life of the period. He knew it through and through; and, largely by means of the beautiful simplicity of his pellucid narrative style, the story-interest is perfectly maintained. That Quick lived imaginatively the life of the period is shown by the fact that he likes to dwell upon the very features which the commentators of those days themselves most emphasized — the beauty of the prairie, described in at least one unforgettable passage; the Iowa blizzards, upon which a prominent incident centers; and such matters as staking a claim, transporting large sums of money, and contacts with picturesque frontier characters. These things are also present in most books of first-hand pioneer reminiscence, but there they are done with less art and with less understanding of how the parts make one whole.

The post war pioneer era in Iowa has been copiously treated by both Quick and Garland. The Quick family came to Iowa in 1857, and the Garlands about ten years later, so both writers had their own

recollections of the sixties, seventies, and eighties to draw upon.

Quick's *The Hawkeye* is a sequel to *Vandemark's Folly*; and, unlike most sequels, it is generally thought to be quite as successful as its predecessor. "Freem" McConkey impedes his narrative with disquisitions more frequently than the less erudite "Jake" Vandemark; but the events of his experience perhaps lend themselves better to effective structure, the lynching at the end being a smashing climax. The characters are excellent: Mrs. McConkey is at once a type of the finest pioneer motherhood and an individual racy of the place and time; "Raws" Upright is an amazingly pleasant scamp; while as for "Freem" himself, one suspects in his likable characteristics and varied experiences more than a little of autobiography.

*The Hawkeye* covers the years from 1857 to 1885, and *The Invisible Woman*, the third of the Quick trilogy, belongs to the eighties and early nineties. It is a story of corruption in State politics. Christina Thorkelson, the heroine, is clerk in a great law firm which deals with politics and thus has an opportunity to see behind the scenes. There is a love story, and a great trial scene. As for politics, one finds them in nearly everything Quick wrote. I remember his saying not long before his death that *Vandemark* represented government as applied to the township, *The Hawkeye* stood for county affairs, and *The Invisible Woman* for State politics.

Quick's autobiography was unfinished, for it carries the story only to 1880; yet *One Man's Life* as we have it possesses a certain completeness. It is one of the best autobiographies of recent years and an invaluable addition to the literature dealing with the later pioneer era. As one who knew him reads it, it almost seems that his thoughtful, keen eyes look out at one from under that extraordinary dome-like brow of his. This book, taken with the trilogy, gives us the record of Herbert Quick's politics and sociology and philosophy of life — the form and pressure of his mind and soul. Honest, essentially and incurably a reformer, a born publicist, garrulous, a lover of good anecdote, and a keen observer, he has shown himself in all his qualities in these books relating to early Iowa.

It is the period of *The Hawkeye* with which Mr. Garland's earlier work coincides. His first stories were published in the late eighties; they were gathered into a book called *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1891. This was followed by two other collections. These stories were not historical in intent when they were published; but they may be so regarded now, since they portray life on Iowa farms as the boy Hamlin Garland had seen it in the seventies. They have been attacked as affording unfair, pessimistic pictures of that later pioneer life, but they are sincerely realistic; there were economic tyranny and oppression on the farm, and Mr. Garland, fired by reform ideas derived from Henry George, set out to

show them to the reader. The stories were effective, and made their author's early reputation.

They were autobiographic fiction. Three years later Mr. Garland published in the *Midland Monthly* a charming sketch called "Boy Life in the West — Winter", which was later printed, along with similar subsequent sketches, in a book with the title *Boy Life on the Prairie*. This volume, which still seems to me superior to all else of Mr. Garland's in freshness and vigor, has been too little praised, until now praise is unnecessary because, with his habit of redaction, its author has incorporated much of the material in *A Son of the Middle Border*. In this last, which is likely to stand as Mr. Garland's best piece of work, he has won to a true perspective of the pioneer period; and as a result he has produced a work kinder, mellow, deeper than was possible to the single-minded writer of the *Main-Travelled Roads* stories.

Three other Middle Border books of autobiography complete an elaborate sequence, but only the first-published of them has much to do with Iowa. Still another book of reminiscences is soon to appear, this one dealing with literary friendships and acquaintance. A brochure called *A Pioneer Mother* must not be forgotten: it is one of the tenderest, sincerest little tributes ever penned. It was written by the son who put half the fee for his first story into the purchase of a silk dress for his hard-working, long-suffering mother.

Mr. Garland's talent is primarily autobiographical. It is true that most of his novels do not reflect directly his own experiences, but by the same token most of his novels can not be said to be very important. He has been writing direct autobiography ever since his early thirties, and now that he has reached three score and ten he writes as he lives — chiefly in the past. One can not talk to him without realizing that, justly enough perhaps, he is out of sympathy with most of the literary life of the present. He gained his first fame by a series of short stories which reflected his own childhood observations and experiences on a pioneer farm; he has attained his later eminence by a sequence of autobiographical works without parallel in American letters.

Iowa is fortunate in having had two such able interpreters of her pioneer life as Hamlin Garland and Herbert Quick.

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