

Rediscovery of the Pioneers

In the days of the Revolutionary War, population long dammed at the Alleghenies began to trickle through the passes across the mountains. In the span of a single long human life from the time of Daniel Boone, the occupation of the continental United States had been substantially completed — the wilderness from the Alleghenies to the Pacific subdued and transformed. To my mind, this is the most dramatic event in human history. No movement of peoples elsewhere in the world's record is comparable to it in extent, in swiftness, and in lasting significance. This great drama was composed of innumerable individual dramas, the experience of men and women and especially of families.

Perhaps the heightened cultural nationalism stimulated by the first World War helped to open the eyes of American writers to this material, though Willa Cather had shown the way as early as 1913, with *O Pioneers!* In any case, effort to portray the westward movement of the nineteenth century, in its varied phases, became a striking and important element in regional literary endeavor in the decade of the 1920's, especially in the Middle West.

Herbert Quick's *Vandemark's Folly* (1922) was the first and the best of Iowa's contributions in this field. I have found positive pleasure in re-reading this novel, after nearly thirty years: in its vitality, its sensitiveness, its firmness in portrayal of people, especially of the central character, "Cow" Vandemark himself. It is a romantic fiction, as are most of the novels of this group. Plot elements are abundant, and everything that can be utilized for dramatic conflict or effect is brought in — outlaws, a blizzard, a prairie fire; but all these elements are firmly integrated with the story as story, and all are made to contribute to the development of character.

Quick had a firm grasp of the historical process as illustrated in the growth of Iowa — a grasp which becomes even more evident in the novels which followed *Vandemark's Folly*: *The Hawkeye* (1923), which records much of the development of a farming community; and *The Invisible Woman* (1924), which probes — less effectively — the intricacies of Iowa politics. He was keenly aware of the social problems that accompanied the process and were parts of it. Vandemark observes on one occasion: "They looked like town people; and I knew already the distance that separated farmers from the dwellers in the towns . . . the difference between those who live on the farms and those who live on the farmers."

Perhaps what I value most of all in *Vandemark's*

Folly is the loving and precise observation of varied aspects of the pioneer experience, as in this picture of the pasque-flowers of the prairie: "... The woolly possblummies in their furry spring coats protecting them against the frost and the chill, showing purple-violet on the outside of a cup filled with golden stamens."

Vandemark was Dutch, and much is made of his Dutchness. But his was not a Dutch community. *The Able McLaughlins*, in Margaret Wilson's novel of that name (1923), are Scotch; and their story is one of a Scotch community as well as of individuals. Portrayal of both is sharp and vigorous. Miss Wilson gives the reader strongly the sense of opportunity experienced by the pioneers, and the sense of stewardship which this opportunity aroused in the best of them: "Even yet he could scarcely believe that there existed such an expanse of eager virgin soil waiting for whoever would husband it. . . . Their rich soil, they promised themselves, was to be richer by far for every crop it yielded." *The Able McLaughlins* has humor — one of the rarest ingredients in Iowa farm fiction, unfortunately. Miss Wilson is not averse to making her addition to the tradition of Scotch thrift:

Andy McFee . . . who was so careful of expenditure that when his corn got a little high in the summer he always took off his shirt and hoed the weeds in his skin, to save the wear of the cloth . . . or John McKnight, who when he

went to mill always took with him a hen tied in a little basket, to eat the oats that fell from his horse's mid-day feeding.

Miss Wilson achieved, too, genuine distinction in another area too little penetrated by writers about farmers, in Iowa or elsewhere — an understanding of what, essentially, makes farmers farm:

To John . . . a field of wheat was a field of wheat, capable of being sold for so many dollars. To Wully, as to his father, there was first always, to be sure, the promise of money in growing grain, and he needed money. But besides that, there was more in it than perhaps anyone can say — certainly more than he ever said — all that keeps farm-minded men farming. It was the perfect symbol of rewarded, lavished labor, of wifely faithfulness, of the flower and fruit of life, its beauty, its ecstasy. Wully was too essentially a farmer ever to try to express his deep satisfaction in words.

Something of this deep comprehension of the relation between the farmer and the land is in Josephine Donovan's *Black Soil* (1930). In this novel we have Irish pioneers, and a quietly religious spirit. It holds much richness of authentic detail. Though the shaping of the story is in some degree romantic, as in all the novels in this group, the characters are real — marked by a genuine heroism that is neither strengthened nor obscured by romantic complication.

With *Vandemark's Folly*, *The Able McLaughlins*, and *Black Soil*, Iowa may be said to have rediscovered her pioneers.