

Makers of Modern Iowa

Two of the volumes in the Iowa Biographical Series which I have elected to include in our third grouping, those with emphasis on the period between the Civil War and the present day, illustrate very notably both the quality of the series and the remarkable range of material offered by the field of Iowa biography: *Peter Melendy*, by Luella M. Wright; and *John A. Kasson*, by Edward Younger. Both of these books meet high and exacting standards, both literary and scholarly. They are written with warmth and with ample and well-chosen concrete detail so that the men whose lives they portray emerge as knowable human beings. At the same time, they display firm organization and ample and precise documentation, and in every aspect satisfy the most exacting requirements of scholarship. Yet their subject matter illustrates the immense diversity of lives which are important in the Iowa story. The arena of Peter Melendy's mature activities was almost wholly limited by the geographical boundaries of the state itself, and largely to a single community. He never sought or gained elective office. His contribution was made directly to the homes and farms of Iowa. In contrast, John A. Kasson's ser-

vice was world wide. He served three terms in the Iowa legislative assembly and six terms in Congress, and fulfilled important foreign assignments under six Presidents. His personal power and capacity made themselves felt in the state, in the nation and in the world. We can be grateful that both of these highly interesting and significant lives have been well and fully pictured in the Iowa Biographical Series.

Like most of his predecessors in the earlier periods, Peter Melendy had "made his mark," and struck out the major lines of his interest and achievements, before he came to Iowa. He was born at Cincinnati in 1823, and grew up in that city during its period of swift development as the metropolis of the region. That development meant prosperity for the family enterprise, the manufacture of fanning mills; and that business led naturally, as Peter came to share in it, to stimulation of his interest in agriculture. When his father died and the family lost the business, Peter Melendy invested his share of the estate in a farm near Cincinnati, where he gained marked distinction, both as a practical farmer and stock raiser and as a writer on agricultural subjects, before his removal to Iowa in 1856.

Melendy's first years in Iowa were devoted to a short-lived co-operative venture in large-scale stock raising on a raw tract of rich land in Butler County. But from the first he made his home at

Cedar Falls, a community scarcely ten years old when the Melendy family arrived. In the foreword to her biography, Dr. Wright emphasizes Melendy's achievement as a community builder through his nearly half a century as a citizen of Cedar Falls, and the significance of that record as representative of Iowa history. Her statement is worth pondering:

Every paved highway across Iowa cuts a gray swath through a succession of prairie villages. Upon the casual motorist these towns have an impression of uniformity, for, at right angles with the thoroughfare, streets with wide-spreading elms and hard maples systematically checkerboard the towns into rectangles. Upon more intimate acquaintance with the life of these communities, each is found to possess individuality. . . .

However much an Iowa town participates in its regional culture, each owes its elemental singularity and its dominant strain to the character of its inhabitants. The distinctive pattern of a community is usually derived from the influence of a few leaders.

Peter Melendy was clearly such a leader. He played a consistently prudent and positive part in the religious, educational, commercial, industrial, and general social development of Cedar Falls, as Dr. Wright shows in a detailed and interesting narrative.

Melendy's importance to Iowa history was not limited to his contribution as a community leader, however. In his chosen field of agricultural education he served the whole state. He began this

work almost immediately after his arrival in Iowa as a newspaper columnist on farm matters. In 1860 he started his department, "Field and Garden," in the *Cedar Falls Gazette*, which developed, in Dr. Wright's words, "into a miniature farm magazine with literary flavor." After helping to organize regional agricultural fairs, Melendy became a director of the State Agricultural Society and helped to shape the early development of the Iowa State Fair. His work with the State Agricultural Society continued for eleven years, the last five of which he served as president. Melendy's greatest contribution to Iowa agriculture and education was probably in his capacity as a member of the first board of trustees of the State Agricultural College. He was chosen by Governor Kirkwood to select the lands granted to the college by the federal government. The task involved a thousand miles of travel by stage coach and on horseback, in twenty-eight counties, and was completed in three months. Later Melendy traveled to Ohio and Kentucky to select and buy livestock for the new college farm, and he served for a time as secretary of the farm. Finally, Melendy and Lieutenant Governor Benjamin F. Gue undertook the responsibility of visiting other agricultural colleges to study methods of organization and courses of study and to select the first president and professors for the new institution. When Melendy finally severed his connection

with the college, he could feel that he had contributed more than any other person to the firm establishment and sound direction of the institution. Melendy's whole career was in large measure a stay-at-home, grass-roots one, marked by little political activity and no national notoriety; but it was deeply significant for Iowa, and truly representative of much that has been best in Iowa.

In contrast, John A. Kasson won his highest honors far from his adopted state, in services that had no direct relation to her fortunes. Born in Vermont in 1822, he practiced law in Massachusetts and in St. Louis before coming to Iowa in 1857. He established a law office in the new capital, and so quickly gained friends and influence that he was made chairman of the state central committee of the new Republican party for the crucial campaign of 1859. In his biography, Edward Younger pictures vividly the progress of this hard fought campaign, and emphasizes the importance of Kasson's service as a member of the Iowa delegation at the Chicago convention which nominated Lincoln. Chosen by his fellow-delegates as their representative on the platform committee, Kasson ultimately had a major hand in drafting the fateful platform.

Though Kasson took an active part in important legislation both in the state and in the nation, perhaps his highest distinction was won in the international field. Appointed as First Assistant

Postmaster General by Lincoln, he conducted for this country, and largely initiated, the negotiations which ultimately led to the formation of the International Postal Union as we have it today. Major diplomatic posts — as Hayes' Minister to Austria-Hungary, and as Arthur's Minister to Germany — together with briefer special missions, gave Kasson a substantial share in the development of the international relations of the United States in a critical period.

I have been interested in the parallels and the contrasts in the lives treated in another pair of volumes in the Iowa Biographical Series: *William Peters Hepburn*, by John Ely Briggs (1919); and *James Baird Weaver*, by Fred Emory Haynes (1919). Both men were born in Ohio, in the same year — 1833. Both came to Iowa in their boyhood, with their families, Hepburn to Iowa City in 1841, Weaver to Keosauqua the following year. Both studied law and were active in frontier politics. Both served with genuine distinction in the Union Army in the Civil War; Weaver advanced from a lieutenancy to regimental command, as colonel of the Second Iowa Infantry, while Hepburn entered the war as captain of the "Marshall Horse Guards" and emerged as lieutenant colonel of the Second Iowa Cavalry. Both went into politics after the war and became nationally prominent and influential.

But there the parallel ends! Hepburn's public

service was performed almost wholly in the halls of Congress, where he served the remarkable total of twenty-two years; indeed, his biographer states that "it is his own estimate that the *Congressional Record* contains everything worth while that he ever did." In that service, Hepburn was from the first and increasingly identified with the conservative elements and policies of the Republican party. Though he played a constructive part in the efforts toward regulation of the railroads, he was criticized as a friend of the railroads and a foe of the farmer, and attacked by Henry Wallace and A. B. Cummins. His biographer shows that this criticism was far from being fully justified, emphasizing especially the part played by Hepburn in his last years in Congress in obtaining enactment of the progressive legislation favored by President Theodore Roosevelt. Yet in the Iowa mind, Hepburn was by and large a conservative.

Not so James Baird Weaver. He withdrew from the Republican party in 1877, after attaining prominence and nearly gaining the nomination for the Governorship in 1875, and was elected to Congress by the Greenback party in 1878. Achieving leadership there, he was the Greenback nominee for President in 1880. After further service in Congress, he left the Greenbackers for the Populist party and was its nominee for the Presidency in 1892. Four years later he led the Populists in support of William Jennings Bryan. Thus

Weaver was more consistently and conspicuously identified with political liberalism and progressivism, during the decades of agrarian unrest following the Civil War, than any other Iowan.

As I write this article a new volume in the Biographical Series of the State Historical Society of Iowa is just coming from the press — the eighteenth: *William Boyd Allison, A Study in Practical Politics*, by Leland L. Sage. William Boyd Allison was first sent to Congress by his fellow Iowans in 1863, as a member of the House of Representatives. Forty-five years later he was nominated — shortly before his death — for an unprecedented seventh term in the Senate of the United States. He had represented Iowa in Washington for forty-three of those forty-five years, thus eclipsing in length of service every other Iowan.

As the title suggests, this work deals primarily — and most thoroughly and ably — with Allison's political career. Dr. Sage has not overlooked or excused certain business dealings of Allison while in Congress, which mar somewhat his earlier career; he does, however, show that these were very mild examples of the low level of political morality in the years following the Civil War, and also that Allison's subsequent conduct as a public servant was free from any such reproach. He traces clearly and interestingly Allison's relations with contemporaries, especially with Jonathan P. Dolliver

and Albert Baird Cummins. Perhaps by intention, this very scholarly volume gives less attention to the personal side — the qualities which must have endeared Allison to thousands of Iowans, and accounted in part for his career — than do others in the series. This lack is in part made good by Dr. Petersen's informal Foreword.

Rounding out the Iowa story as contained in the lives of its representative citizens are four more volumes in the Iowa Biographical Series: *Josiah Bushnell Grinnell*, by Charles E. Payne (1938); *Leonard Fletcher Parker*, by Jacob Armstrong Swisher (1927); *Samuel Freeman Miller*, by Charles Noble Gregory (1907); and *Robert Gordon Cousins*, by Jacob A. Swisher (1938). Grinnell was one of those vigorous and farsighted men of affairs who gave their names to Iowa towns — and in this case to a college as well. Parker was a builder of Iowa's educational system — as legislator, as public school official, and as teacher at Iowa College (later Grinnell College), and at the State University of Iowa. Miller was, like Kason, an Iowan distinguished primarily for service outside the state. He was appointed as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States by President Lincoln in 1862, and served until his death in 1890. Gregory's book includes the full text of some of Miller's addresses and a calendar of his opinions. Cousins represented Iowans in Congress for sixteen years, but his rep-

utation in the state and in the nation rested primarily on his ability as an orator — on “the brilliancy of his spoken words,” as Dr. Shambaugh expressed it in his Introduction to the biographical volume by Jacob A. Swisher. Appropriately, therefore, two-thirds of the pages of this book are devoted to presentation in whole or in part of more than a score of Cousins’ orations.

Rich biographical materials, not published in book form and hence omitted from the present survey, are scattered through the volumes of Iowa periodicals, particularly *The Annals of Iowa*, *The Iowa Historical Record*, *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, and *The Palimpsest*. Here and elsewhere are the materials for many more books as well as briefer biographical studies which are complete in themselves as parts of the Iowa story told in the lives of its citizens.

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