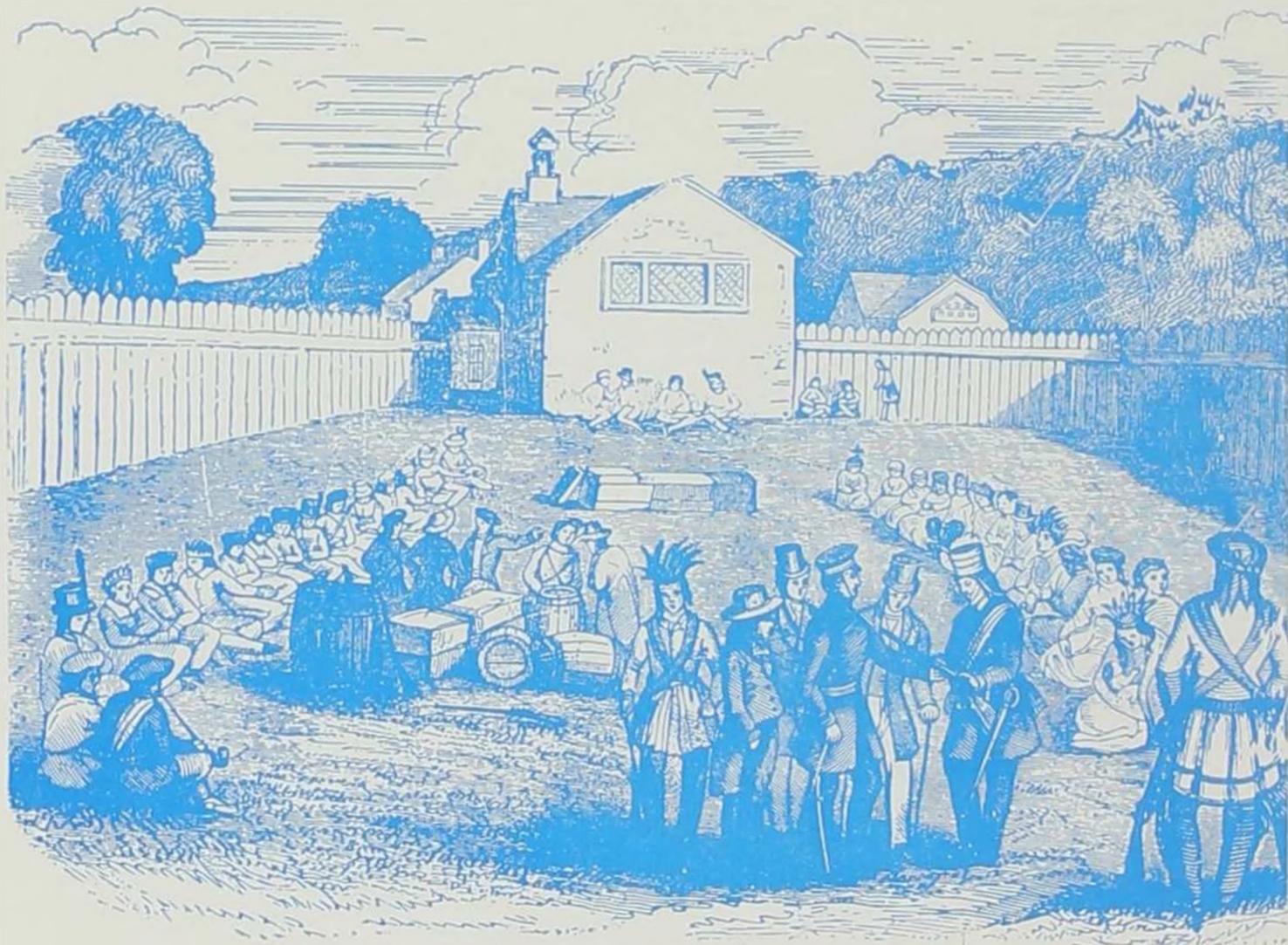


The
PALIMPSEST



Indians receive goods at a trading post

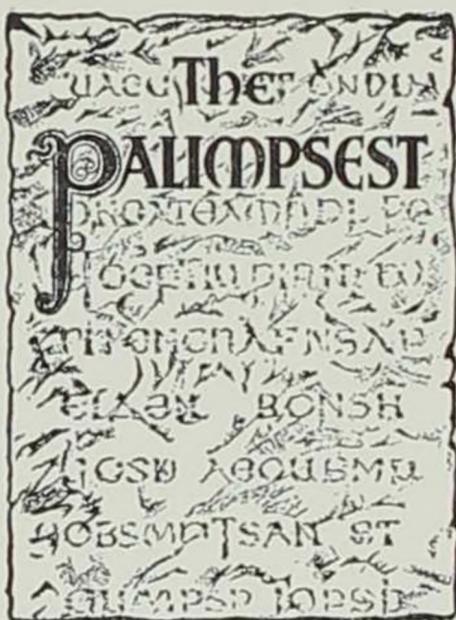
EARLY IOWA IN FICTION

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The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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Front — A sketch by George Catlin found in his *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1857), I, facing p. 45.

Back — *Outside*: An engraving in *W. A. Adams' Directory of the City of Dubuque [1857-1858]* (Dubuque, n. d.).

Author

Professor John T. Frederick currently lives on a farm at Glennie, Michigan, teaches part time at Notre Dame, and writes a book review section for *The Rotarian*.

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THE PALIMPSEST

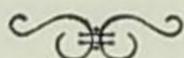
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An Introductory Note

I have discussed in earlier articles, in our survey of the literature of Iowa, the fiction of Iowa farm life, and that dealing with Iowa life in towns and cities. There remains a third field, perhaps less rich and significant, but one peculiarly attractive to story-tellers. This is the period of Iowa's earliest history, of fur traders and Indian wars and the first beginnings of settlement. In considering the work of those writers of fiction who have dealt with this earliest period, I shall try as before to appraise both its value as social history and the degree of its achievement as literature.

Early days on Iowa farms were part of the material of Margaret Wilson in *The Able McLaughlins*, and of Herbert Quick in *Vandemark's Folly*; their work has been treated in a preceding article and will not be included here. Similarly excluded are accounts of early Iowa in the form of autobiography, since autobiographical writings about Iowa are to be studied later.

The writers who have sought to recreate for

their readers the Iowa frontier and the experience of the men and women who knew and lived it have faced problems different from those encountered by most of the writers we have considered in earlier articles. The fiction of Iowa farm life and of the life of Iowa towns and cities has been built for the most part on the personal experience of the writers — as in Ruth Suckow's *New Hope* and Ellis Parker Butler's *Dominie Dean*; or on family background and tradition, as in Wilson's *The Able McLaughlins* and Quick's *Vandemark's Folly*. Such substance, immediately and intimately known, is not available to the novelist who wishes to portray the fur trade or the Black Hawk War, the explorations of Zebulon Pike or the founding of Fort Des Moines. He must turn to documentary and secondary sources: the journals and letters of travelers, old newspaper files, the few remaining and scattered records of the fur trade and of military operations. His material is rich, colorful, exciting; but he must come to command it by research and study: he must be a scholar as well as a creative writer. Only when he has mastered his material, has come to know it so well that it is real and intense as imaginative experience, can he hope to share its richness with his reader in fiction that is absorbing and convincing. When such mastery of material is matched by effective storytelling, we have good fiction of earliest Iowa.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

Black Hawk and White Men

The central fact of American history is the Westward Movement — that stupendous dramatic action whereby in the span of a single long human life the whole vast region from the Appalachians to the Pacific was subdued and occupied by the white race: in the years of the Revolution, the first trickle of settlers across the mountains into Tennessee and Kentucky; a century later, the United States cavalry rounding up the last surviving Sioux and Apaches into reservations, and the continent transformed into one vast farm and workshop.

A central theme of that great drama is the conflict of cultures incidental to the displacement of red men by white. James Fenimore Cooper, America's first major novelist, grasped and fully developed this theme more than a century and a quarter ago. In his great *Leatherstocking Tales*, and especially in his little-known but excellent novel, *The Oak Openings*, we have clearly seen and deeply felt all the tragedy, the rare comedy and frequent irony, of the sustained and bloody contest between the races for possession of the land. In his pages are all the representative (and often repeated) characters of the drama: the white man

who knows and respects the Indians and is respected and trusted by them, and the rum-dispensing trader; the missionary who labors to save the Indians' souls and the "Indian hater" who collects their scalps; the settler hungry for land and heedless of Indian rights and claims, and the military leader unhappily trying to execute, with whatever degree of justice and mercy may be possible, the social mandate of "manifest destiny." The writers who have followed Cooper in recognition and treatment of this theme are legion, and some among them belong to Iowa.

Iowa's stake in the great theme of the conflict between red and white centers in the person of a single Indian, Black Hawk, war chief of the Sauk tribe. Iowa's claim is attested by a county name and by the memorials on the bluffs along the Mississippi. What is now Iowa was ceded by the Sauk and Fox after the Black Hawk War in 1832, and was known for a time as the Black Hawk Purchase. As a matter of fact, Iowa's interest in the Black Hawk story is to some degree that of a residual legatee. The cornfields and village sites for which Black Hawk fought — the traditional homeland of the Sauk — were east of the Mississippi. The Iowa prairies were their hunting grounds. However, the conviction that Black Hawk belongs to Iowa — jointly with Illinois and Wisconsin — is firmly fixed in many Iowa minds; and I feel justified in including novels about Black

Hawk in our survey even though they may touch only obliquely or incidentally what are Iowa territory and history in the precise sense. The famous chieftain's autobiography, reprinted by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is one of the most interesting of the autobiographical works which we shall be considering in a later article in this series.

The most stringent demand upon the writer who attempts to deal with that conflict of cultures which was a major aspect of the Westward Movement is that he shall understand the Indian mind. Without knowledge of how the Indians thought, and of the whole complex of religious belief, tradition, folklore, custom, and attitude within which and according to which they lived, it is impossible for the writer to make of his Indians more than wooden figures, mechanically contrived and operated. A writer grows up with this necessary basic background for understanding the conduct of white men. If he fails to make the actions of his white characters convincing, the fault is usually one of technical incompetence or of sheer carelessness. It is not so for Indian characters. At best a modern writer's comprehension of the old world of the Indians can be but partial. Only by extended and patient study, by a sincere will to understand implemented by earnest effort, can he enter that world at all.

Few famous Indians have been the object of so widely divergent opinions as has Black Hawk. To

many of his contemporaries he was clearly a blood-thirsty savage, vengeful, unreasonable, important only because he was dangerous. But to many others even in his own time there was a firm basis of logic in his attitude, and consistency in his conduct. This divergence of view is illustrated by four novels which deal directly with Black Hawk and his struggle against the coming of the white men which centered in the Black Hawk War.

Two of these novels are by writers whom we cannot claim as Iowans: *The Shining Trail* (1943), by Iola Fuller of Michigan; and *Wind Over Wisconsin* (1938), by August Derleth, who has made the historical backgrounds of his native Wisconsin his major field. Miss Fuller's study of Black Hawk is highly sympathetic, and *The Shining Trail* is outstanding in its grasp and penetration of the Indian world. Miss Fuller's thorough study of all aspects of Indian life is matched by the quality of her writing. *The Shining Trail* will richly reward the reader who is interested in Black Hawk and his times. August Derleth's *Wind Over Wisconsin* is a fast-moving and highly readable romantic novel of the period of the Black Hawk War. Its chief emphasis is on the reaction of white settlers to the crisis, and the author makes no attempt at full or searching characterization of the Indians. In general effect, his treatment of them is along conventional lines.

Two novels by Iowa writers, *As the Crow Flies*

(1927), by Cornelia Meigs, and *Thunder on the River* (1949), by Charlton Laird, include full-length portrayals of Black Hawk, but differ in their views as to the mainspring of his conduct. Miss Meigs finds the clue to Black Hawk's career in a personal experience of his young manhood. In Mr. Laird's interpretation, Black Hawk's clear recognition of the tragic destiny of his race plays a major part. In *As the Crow Flies*, Black Hawk is first of all "the enemy of white men;" the emphasis is on the dark and savage aspects of his character. Mr. Laird's treatment provides a more fully rounded and humanly understandable person. It is interesting that in the three novels noted which stress the figure of Black Hawk — *The Shining Trail*, *As the Crow Flies*, and *Thunder on the River* — the same narrative device is employed for portrayal of the chief: the point of view of an alien adopted into the tribe and befriended by Black Hawk.

Cornelia Meigs

Cornelia Meigs, born in Illinois, early became a resident of Keokuk, Iowa. She has written more than a dozen books of fiction. Most of these are primarily intended for young readers, of high school age and thereabouts; but I have found them all enjoyable and rewarding for what is presumably an adult taste and interest. Miss Meigs has given especial attention in her fiction to the Iowa-

Illinois frontier along the Mississippi, in the period of the earliest settlements; her work in this field very definitely calls for consideration in our present study. She has written some excellent books for younger children, and has done distinguished editorial work in the field of juvenile literature.

Possibly the reason I found *As the Crow Flies* the most interesting and substantial of Miss Meigs' studies of frontier days was the fact that I had read so recently, in THE PALIMPSEST for May, 1955, the biography of Zebulon M. Pike and Dr. Petersen's admirable treatment of Pike's journal of his Mississippi expedition: for this book is built around that expedition, and its most appealing character is the youthfully enthusiastic Zebulon M. Pike.

The central figure of *As the Crow Flies*, however, is an Indian boy named Natzoon. Like the central character of Iola Fuller's *The Shining Trail* — Chaske, the son of a Sioux captive — Natzoon is a Sauk of alien blood: his mother is a Chippewa princess. Like Chaske again, Natzoon becomes a protégé of Black Hawk. From the old chief he imbibes a spirit of implacable hatred of the whites. When he sees Pike, at the latter's council with Black Hawk, Natzoon wavers in his determined hatred of the white race, for the Indian boy is strongly attracted by the candor and courage shown by the red-headed young officer.

However, learning that one of Pike's purposes is to meet and treat with the chiefs of the various tribes along the way, in the interest of peace with the United States and with each other, Natzoon undertakes a mission to precede Pike on his journey and poison the minds of the Indians against him. In the course of this mission he encounters a white boy of his own age, Malcolm Cloud, the son of a British trader, who becomes his friend and ultimately wins him away from his intolerant hatred of the whites.

The most appealing Indian character in *As the Crow Flies* is the Sioux chief, Wabashah, who is the only one of the chieftains interviewed by Pike who gives him a fair hearing and a degree of friendly understanding. Wabashah "had the look of great strength; but he was gnarled and knotted in a fashion quite unlike the smooth slimness of the ordinary Indian brave." He tells Pike: "I have thought over this matter of red man and white, and it is my belief that the Mississippi is a big river and that she has room upon her banks for us all."

"Black Hawk thinks otherwise," declared Pike, studying Wabashah's face for the effect of his words.

"For Black Hawk I have little love," returned Wabashah curtly. "He is one of those who looks only backward toward the past, who does not take thought of the new things which must come. . . ."

Let Black Hawk and his warriors go their way and let me go mine. The passing moons will show which of us has the greater wisdom."

Through Chief Wabashah, Natzoon comes to understand the special personal enmity of Black Hawk for the whites; it has originated in a shameful and wanton beating and mutilation inflicted on Black Hawk, when a young warrior, by a band of white outlaws — led, as Natzoon learns, by a Sauk jealous of Black Hawk. Thus Black Hawk's career is made, in this book, to turn upon a personal injury rather than upon the harsh and unfair treatment given his tribe.

The character of Zebulon Pike — red-haired, impetuous, dedicated to his mission and devoted to the welfare of his men — is very attractively presented in *As the Crow Flies*. Perhaps it is somewhat idealized; but in general the portrayal of Pike's Mississippi expedition follows his journal faithfully. This book has both good characters and an engaging story.

A corner of Iowa in the days of earliest settlement, in the Keokuk country, when the Indians still lingered, is the setting for the major portion of *The New Moon* (1924), another of Cornelia Meigs' best Iowa books: though the story begins in Ireland, and pauses in Pennsylvania on the way West. One of the most vivid and appealing incidents of the book occurs at the fair in Pennsylvania, at which the Irish boy, Dick Martin, whose

story this is, buys and tames a ram made vicious by mistreatment. He and his mentor and companion, Thomas Garrity, drive their flock of sheep across the land to Iowa, and begin to farm there. They make friends with the neighboring Sauks: the theme of friendship between the white and Indian boys, breaking down racial barriers, is present here as in *As the Crow Flies*. At the end of the book, Dick has to face the issue of returning to Ireland or remaining in the new land, and decides to stay. Thomas Garrity expresses it:

I have the feeling, which I think you have also, that we and this green valley have grown to be one; that we belong to it, rather than that it belongs to us. . . . It is so the Indians feel, and it is what every settler on the frontier should learn to understand. If you had looked for the making of much money in this venture, if you had been one of those who wishes to grasp as many acres of land as he can, and sell them again, this would be no place for you . . . unless you have wished, not to possess this new country, but to be a part of it, then you are no true pioneer.

A third story by Cornelia Meigs which well deserves our attention here is *Swift Rivers* (1937), a vigorous tale of the great log-rafting days on the Mississippi. The techniques and problems of the rafters are well interwoven with a pleasant story about a young logger from Wisconsin whose unselfish motive in his work marks his character. Though few of the scenes and none of the major characters of this story belong to Iowa, the history

of rafting is so definitely a part of the Iowa background — and has been so largely neglected by writers of fiction — that I believe many Iowans will share my feeling of pleasure in recognizing the merit of this well-told story. For older readers as well as for those younger folk who have been chiefly in her mind as audience, the fiction of Cornelia Meigs has a definite place in our Iowa literature.

Charlton Laird

The most objective view of Black Hawk and the clearest and fullest picture of his times which I have found in fiction come from the pen of a native Iowan. Charlton Laird was born at Nashua in 1901. He attended the State University of Iowa, and later taught at Drake University.

Laird meets precisely the requirements I noted early in this article: that to deal successfully with early history one must be a good scholar as well as a good writer. Holder of a Ph.D. degree from Stanford University and now chairman of the department of English at the University of Nevada, Laird is eminently qualified as a scholar. He is the compiler of *Laird's Promptory*, a dictionary of synonyms on a new plan, and has done much scholarly work in varied fields.

The life of Black Hawk and the history of his period have been objects of almost lifelong interest. Laird grew up in country rich in Indian lore,

opposite Prairie du Chien. There were many Indian mounds on his father's farm. Consistent pursuit of this early interest has qualified him to write with sureness and accuracy. Fortunately, he writes with artistry as well.

Thunder on the River (1949) and *West of the River* (1953) are the first and second novels in a projected series. In their pages we view the career of Black Hawk and the background of related people and events through the experience of representative frontiersmen. Mark Eldridge, the central character of *Thunder on the River*, has come to the frontier like many others — because of trouble at home. He has some degree of education, a good mind and a strong body. His primary purpose is exploitation of the frontier for what he can get out of it. He fights and bargains, seduces the daughter of a French trader, joins a military expedition. One of the high spots of the story, and a very good piece of narrative writing indeed, is the account of the defense of an unfinished fort, by this small force, against greatly superior numbers of Sauk warriors. Especially telling in this incident is the concise but memorable characterization of one Ensign Vasquez, an experienced artilleryman, who saves the lives of most of the garrison at the cost of his own. He is seen very sharply, a quick little man, with his broken English and his rallying cry of "damnfernando!" After his death:

Mark wondered aloud who Vasquez was, and what kind of life was ended by that half-spent bullet. But nobody Mark asked could tell him. Vasquez was just a stranger who had done a brave deed in a land where he would soon be forgotten.

The power to make such briefly seen characters come alive in the reader's mind and to impress them there lastingly is one of the marks of the truly competent historical novelist. It is through such vivid and significant dramatic glimpses that much of the full color and firm texture of sound historical fiction is achieved.

Mark is captured by Black Hawk; and though he has the typical frontiersman's attitude that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," something about him appeals to Black Hawk or challenges him. The chieftain spares Mark's life, inducts him into the life of the tribe, eventually adopts him as a foster son. Mark takes a Sauk woman as his wife — a comely and intelligent young widow named Little Turtle; but he does so reluctantly and "with his fingers crossed," cherishing meanwhile a sentimental memory of the trader's daughter. When after years of Indian life he is free again, he finds the trader's daughter married to a loutish sot, and comes at the last to appreciate in some degree the fineness and loyalty of Little Turtle.

Again the victim of divided loyalties, Mark is a member of Black Hawk's band in the chief's last

warfare with the whites, tries in vain to obtain for the fleeing Indians mercy if not justice, and is a witness of the massacre at Bad Axe. From the whole experience he gains a new and balanced understanding of the Indian and his fate. It is Laird's consistent use of Mark's point of view, initially wholly hostile but gradually growing into comprehension and sympathy, that gives his portrayal of the controversial figure of the war chief its satisfying objectiveness and convincingness.

Black Hawk and Little Turtle are the only Indian characters fully treated in *Thunder on the River*. Among the white characters, Colonel George Davenport appears under his own name and commands respect. He is introduced by his remark which Mark Eldridge overhears:

"No, thank you, I won't have anything to drink, for being an atheist with no god to forgive my sins, I have to be uncommonly moral."

Mark looked up from his hand of whisky poker to see a man as startling as the remark. He wore old, well-rubbed buckskin which had settled into the sags and hollows of his tall, spare frame. Above the shirt made by some squaw was a high-nosed, aristocratic face, the skin pinked, rather than tanned, with the sun. The man spoke meticulously in a slightly nasal British voice. If he had arrived in a sedan chair with a blackamoor page, Mark would have been no more astounded.

Later Davenport rebukes Mark's shallow assumption that a "dead Indian's a good Indian."

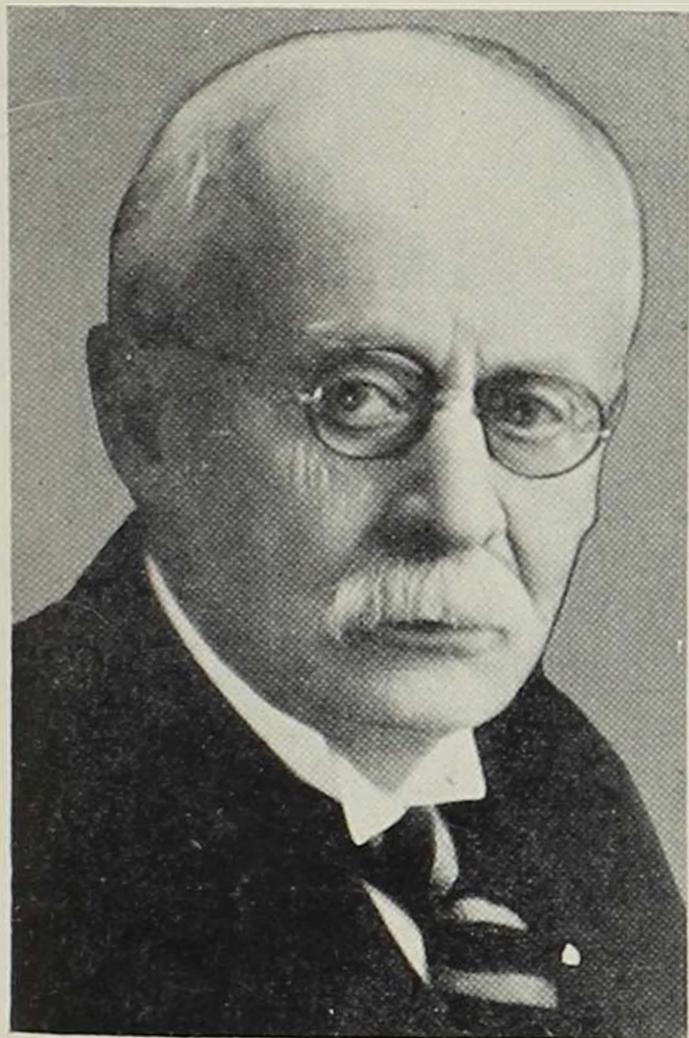
I am not convinced of that, Mr. Eldridge. The Indians of my acquaintance are rather remarkable in the possession of what appears to some white men as a sophisticated concept — that is, a good man is a good man, whatever his color.

Further contribution to the correction of Mark's initial view of the Indians is made by "Judge" [John] Johnson, fur trader and factor whose employee Mark becomes. Johnson is a genial, courageous, and essentially just man. His character is more fully rounded in the second novel of Laird's series, *West of the River*.

This later work shows distinct growth in Charlton Laird's power as an historical novelist. Though it contains no individual episodes of such sustained dramatic intensity as the attack on the fort and the massacre at Bad Axe, in the earlier novel, its characterization is more searching, the narrative line is stronger in the book as a whole, and the interest is more positively sustained.

Mark Eldridge appears again in this novel as a secondary character, but one firmly rendered. He is a friend and advocate of the Indians now, trying against insurmountable odds to help them. The focus of the book is on Paul Boudreau, a young French Canadian fur trader. As the book opens Paul is planning to leave the fur trade, which he hates because only by cheating and debauching the Indians can money be made. He finds his trading post burned, his small fortune in

FOUR IOWA HISTORICAL NOVELISTS



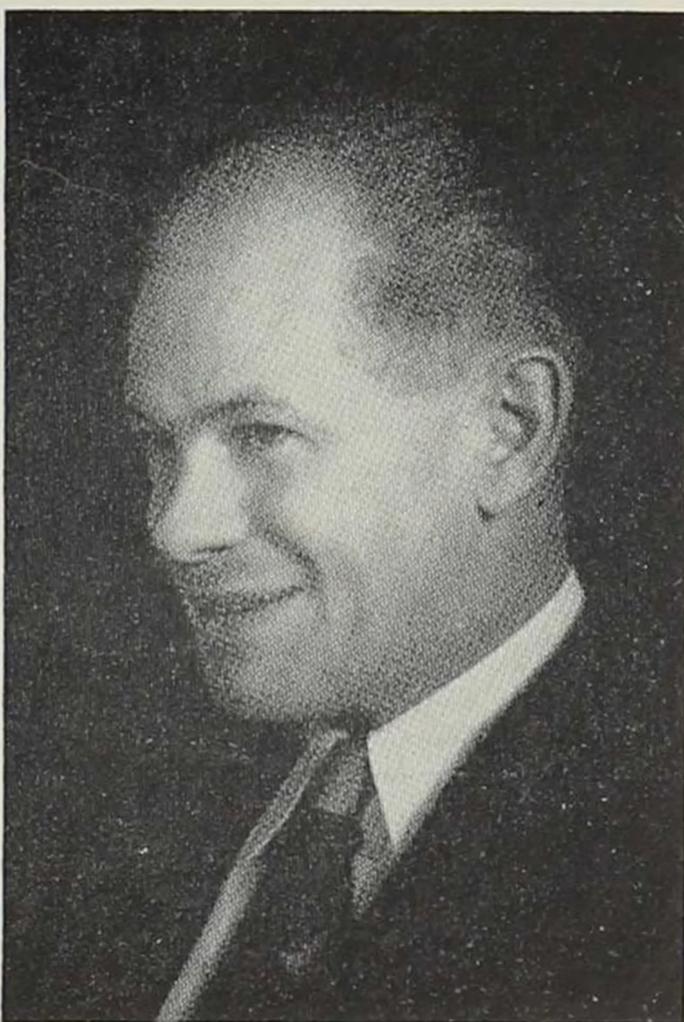
JOHNSON BRIGHAM



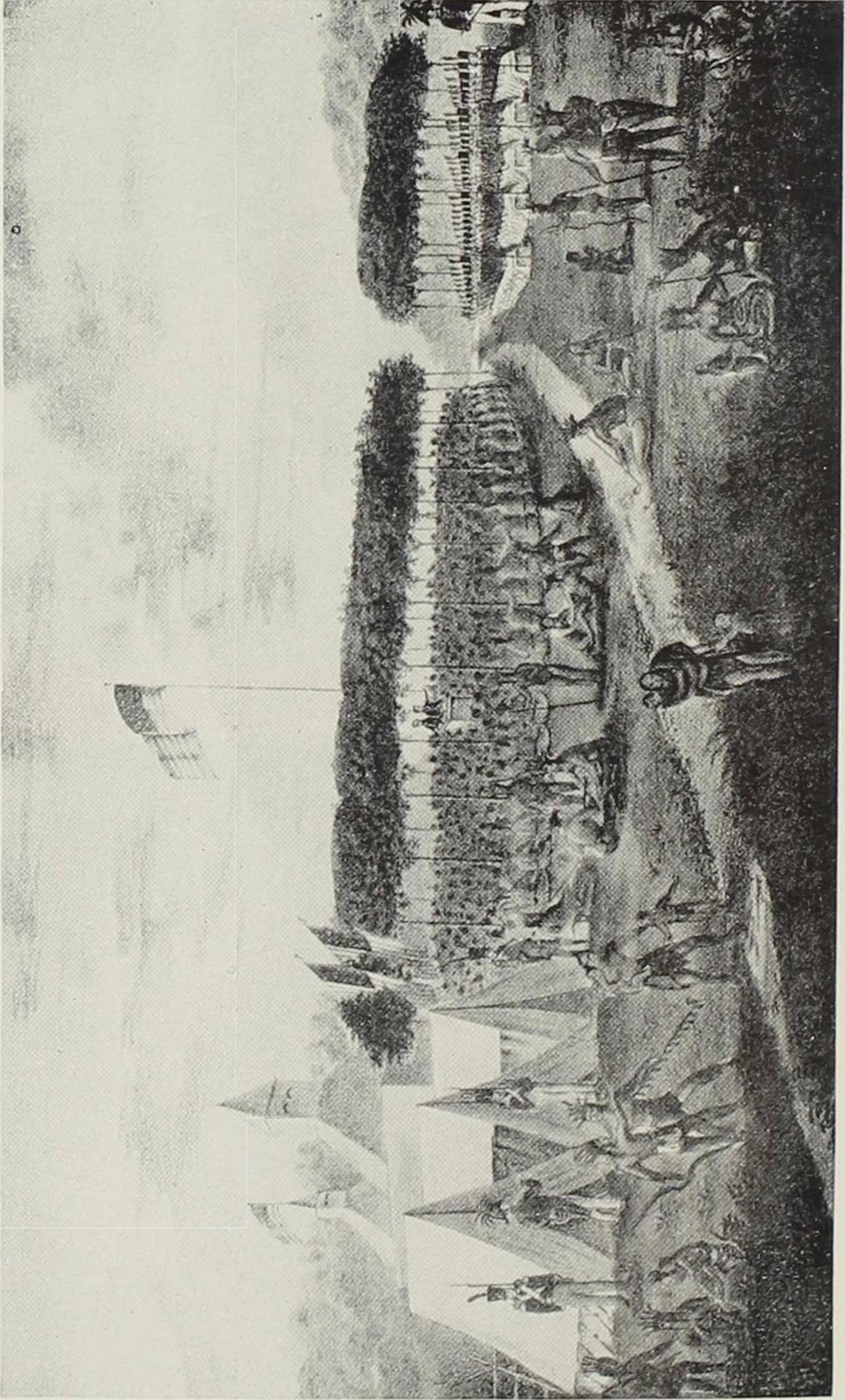
CORNELIA MEIGS



PHIL STONG

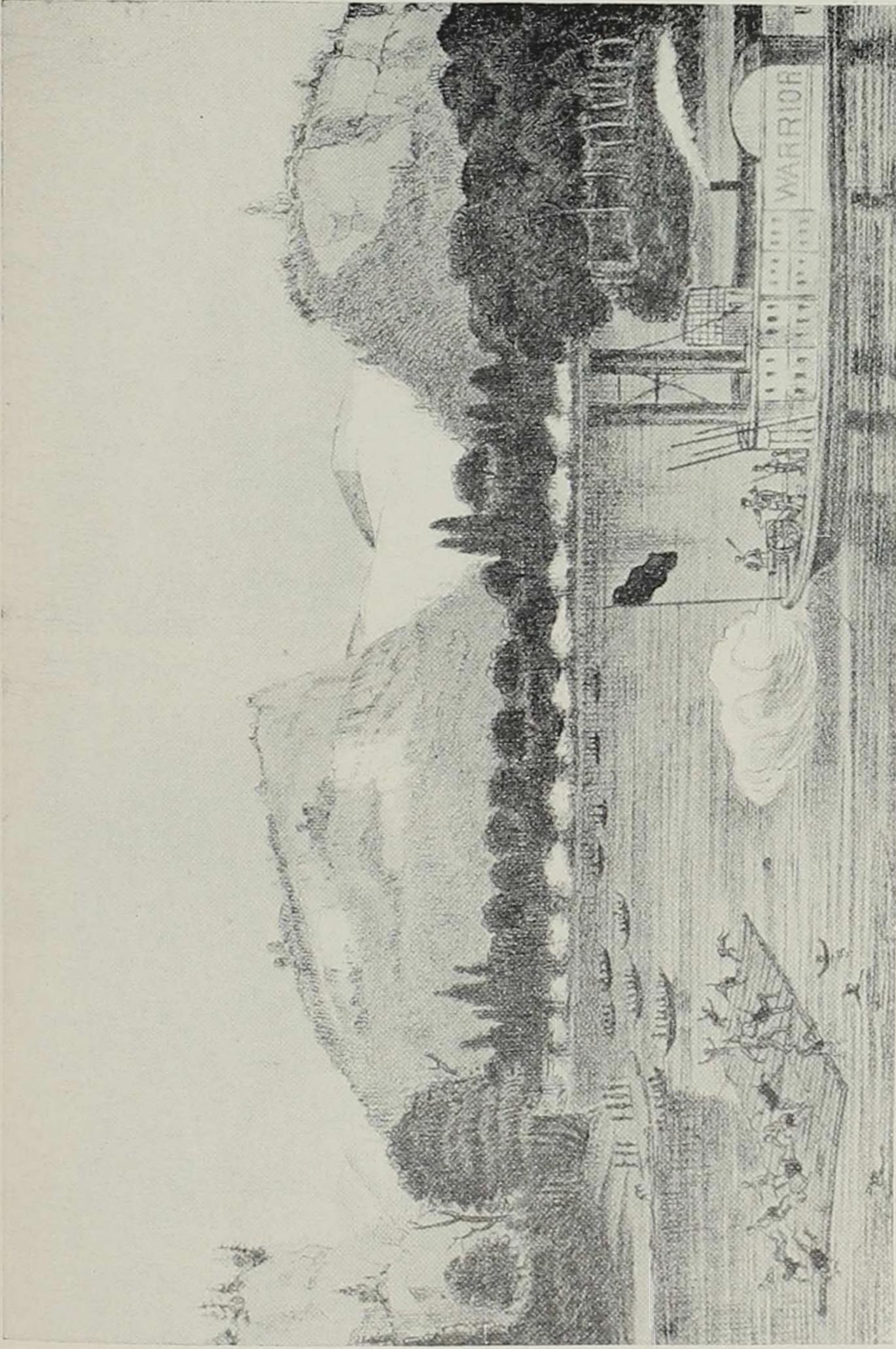


CHARLTON LAIRD



The Great Council of 1825 at Prairie du Chien where the American government sought to bring peace between the Sioux and the Sauk and Fox.

Painting by J. O. Lewis

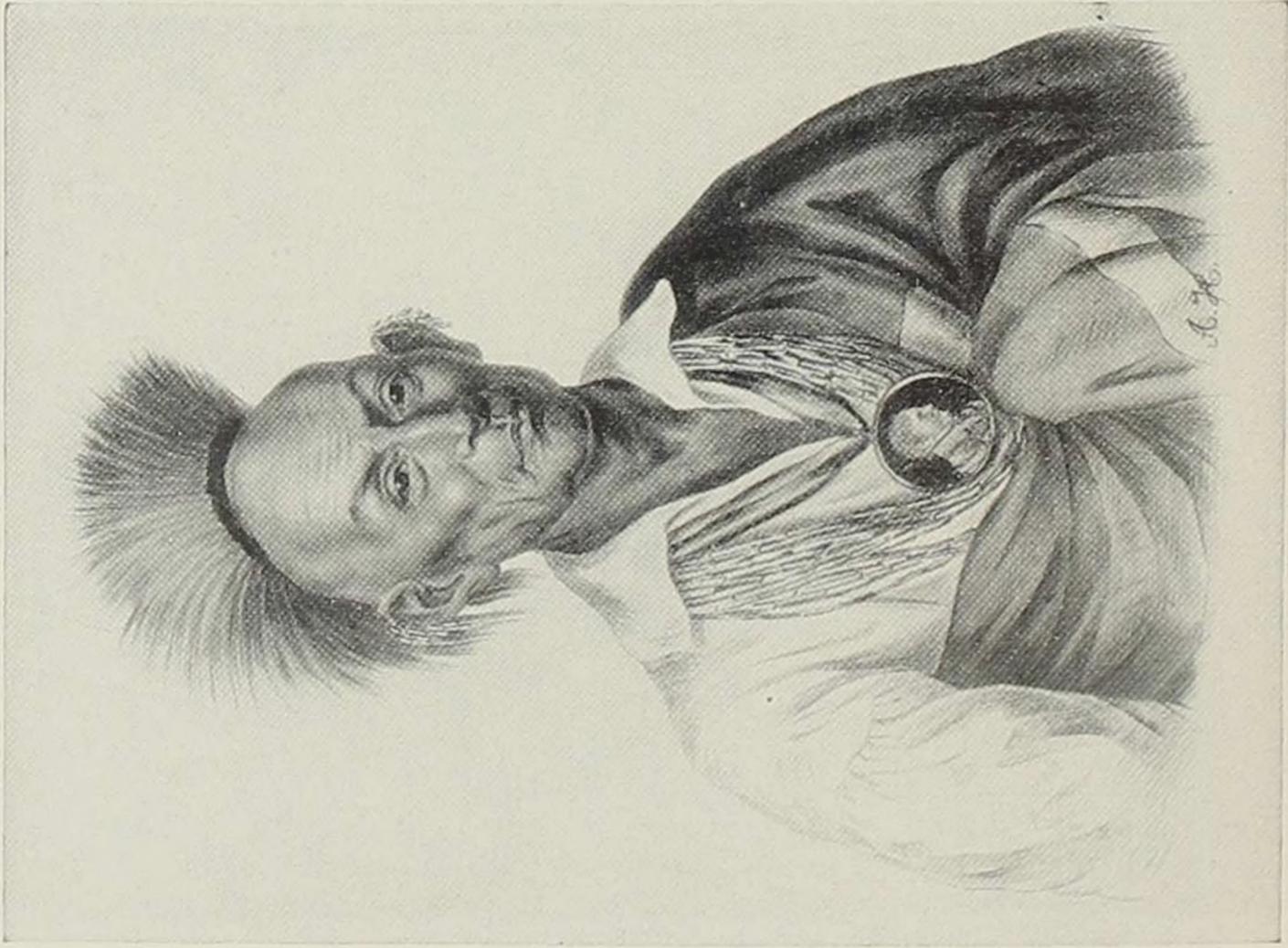


Painting by Henry Lewis

The Battle of Bad Axe, August 1, 1832, which climaxed the Black Hawk War.

between the Sioux and the Sauk and Fox.

TWO LEADERS OF MEN IN IOWA'S EARLY YEARS



Painting by C. B. King

CHIEF BLACK HAWK



From Fulton's *Red Men of Iowa*

COLONEL GEORGE DAVENPORT

furs destroyed — presumably by agents of the American Fur Company, Astor's men, who are driving out the independent traders.

Paul is at war with himself as well as with circumstances: he has never forgiven the fact of his nameless birth in Quebec, and his boyhood in an orphanage. Under the double stress of this unconquered sense of shame and the immediate disaster, he enters upon two courses of action which deepen his self-contempt: an affair with a woman he comes to despise, the wife of an unscrupulous French trader; and a deliberate large-scale victimizing of the Indians in collusion with an agent of the American Fur Company — the celebrated Half-Breed Steal. He goes among the Indians, who in the past have learned to like and respect him, getting them to "sign" documents acknowledging fictitious debts to the fur company which will enable the company to acquire title to the lands the government has set aside for Indians of mixed blood. In the end he is saved — is led to a course of conduct which enables him to live with himself in peace of mind — largely through the unselfish love of Dollie, the half-Indian daughter of Mark Eldridge.

No Indian characters are given extensive treatment in this novel. "Judge" Johnson is the "hero" of a delightful comic incident, a duel with rocks. Johnson, Eldridge, a completely inept and incompetent government agent named Bunyan, and

young Lieutenant George Wilson are characterized with very definite effectiveness. The total effect of this novel is that of a convincing and richly detailed portrayal of the frontier at a crucial moment — with the demoralization and degradation of the still-dangerous Indians as the sombre background for the working out, in one man's life, of a universal human problem. Charlton Laird's contribution to the literature of early Iowa is substantial and distinguished.

Iowa writers, notably Charlton Laird — whose further work in this field I look forward to with eagerness — have met the challenge posed by the mysteries of Indian character, and have demonstrated the richness of the material for fiction which lies in the conflict between the races as focused on Iowa's eastern boundary. Their work holds an important place in Iowa fiction as a whole.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

Infant Iowa

Before the Indians and the fur traders had departed, cities were beginning to rise on Iowa's eastern boundary, along the Mississippi, and military outposts were being established in the interior of the state. The story of these beginnings belongs to the literature of earliest Iowa, equally with the tragic career of Black Hawk and the conflict between the races.

M. M. Hoffman

In an earlier article I expressed regret that certain Iowa cities — Dubuque among them — still wait for adequate treatment in our literature. That observation was inaccurate so far as Dubuque's earliest history is concerned, for in Mathias M. Hoffman's *Young and Fair is Iowa* (1946) we have a detailed and historically accurate portrayal of that city's early years. The cast of characters of the Right Reverend Monsignor Hoffman's novel includes nearly fifty actual historical figures of the place and time. Among the most clearly pictured are Dr. Mathias Loras, first bishop of Iowa of the Roman Catholic Church; Rev. Samuel Mazzuchelli, O. P., pioneer missionary and church architect; and Augustus

Caesar Dodge and George Wallace Jones, both generals in the Black Hawk War and later United States Senators from Iowa.

The central character is fictional: Eliphalet Foster, a Yankee adventurer and fortune seeker, with a good education, some money, and qualities of personal courage and integrity. The plot is built around his romantic love for a French girl, Julie De L'Isle, and also about a false accusation of murder brought against Foster by personal enemies. There is a good deal of the artificial about this plot, and the structure of the novel is further weakened by narration of Eliphalet's part in the Mexican War (though some of the narrative of action in this section is admirable), and by a lengthy "California interlude." Probably Hoffman's best characterization is that of Captain Hiram Kimbell — in connection with whom we see something of the rapidly expanding Mississippi River traffic — and his unscrupulous daughter, Cora. The divisive force of the abolition issue, rising in the young city as the book ends, and the divergence of religious faith which long keeps Foster and Julie apart, are sound dramatic elements which for the most part are effectively employed.

The very real value of *Young and Fair is Iowa*, apart from the themes just mentioned, lies in the strong sense it gives the reader of many aspects of the turbulent life of the infant city, especially of

its burgeoning economy and rapid cultural changes.

Johnson Brigham

Johnson Brigham's contribution to Iowa literature in other fields far outweighs his achievement as a novelist. As founder and editor of *The Midland Monthly*, one of the most important of the various and interesting though short-lived magazines which marked the regional literary emphasis of the 1890's, he provided stimulus to Iowa writers (few of whom in that time were able to respond with any degree of adequacy), and gave tremendous impetus to the general cultural development of the state and region. His subsequent contribution as an Iowa historian and librarian was also highly important.

In his novel, *The Sinclairs of Old Fort Des Moines* (1927), Johnson Brigham essayed to render representative experience of the first permanent outpost in central Iowa of the advancing white population, building his story around the fortunes of a single family. The somewhat artificial plot revolves around the love affairs of the attractive Sinclair daughters, and includes the hazards of Indians and outlaws, storms, loneliness, and the other hardships of pioneer life. Brigham tapped in this novel a rich vein which other writers have failed to develop so far as Iowa is concerned: the complex and often highly dramatic personal

and social relationships characteristic of a small and isolated military establishment. Some of the best of recent "western" novels, dealing with the personnel of such establishments in the Great Plains and the Southwest, have shown the fictional possibilities of this material.

Perhaps Brigham's most notable emphasis in this novel, however, is on an aspect of the immigration into Iowa which is also stressed in Phil Stong's *Buckskin Breeches*, though often overlooked by writers of fiction and neglected in the popular picture of the frontier. This is the fact of the possession of noteworthy cultural backgrounds and attainments by many of the first settlers of Iowa. The Sinclairs are cultured people; and cultured they remain, though they live in a log cabin at the edge of the wilderness. Music, books, and breeding are part of their heritage, and of the heritage they passed on to succeeding generations. Thus, there is freshness and clearness of significant vision in *The Sinclairs of Old Fort Des Moines*; the literary treatment of this material, unfortunately, is of limited competence. The characters and the story alike fail to come to life with any degree of authority or consistency.

Phil Stong

Master of various aspects of the life of his native state, Phil Stong is clearly Iowa's most versatile writer as well as certainly one of our most con-

sistently satisfying. He has not neglected earliest Iowa in his appreciative recognition of fictional material in Iowa life. In *Buckskin Breeches* (1937), *Ivanhoe Keeler* (1939), and *Forty Pounds of Gold* (1951), we have sharply realized portrayals of the beginnings of permanent settlement in Iowa.

A recurring pattern marks two of these books. The hero's adventures begin in Iowa, carry him far afield into the lusty life of young America; but ultimately he returns. In *Ivanhoe Keeler* the immediate occasion for the hero's precipitate departure is his discovery that the girl of whom he has carried a sentimental image in his heart — daughter of an Iowa settler — has married in his absence and has produced twins! The twins are the crowning insult. John Warwick, seeking his "forty pounds of gold" in California, learns that his idealized fair one has married a preacher; that is almost as bad as twins.

Rereading *Ivanhoe Keeler* after more than fifteen years, I have enjoyed every page of it. The tale is frankly romantic; but Stong meets the test of the romantic novelist — he gains surely and consistently "the willing suspension of disbelief." As I read I am perfectly aware that such things don't happen — that a wandering fiddler with the Midas touch and a heart of gold as well could exist only in Phil Stong's warm imagination; but this awareness doesn't bother me in the least.

Ivanhoe has been fiddling for money since boyhood. He is openhearted, courageous, consistent in living by his personal code. As the story grows he gathers an entourage: a mountainous, unlettered young man named Charlie Hoskin — whose beloved has compared him to a covered wagon and chosen another — and an Admirable Crichton of a Negro body-servant named Samaliel. The course of their adventures — in Cuba, in Europe, back in the United States and during the Mexican War — is punctuated by Ivanhoe's fervent and invariably disappointing affairs of the heart. As Ivanhoe diagnoses his own case, "I'm not only a parasite — I'm a damn fool. Every time I see a tasty girl I believe my own music."

The real issue in Ivanhoe's life — and here Stong strikes deeper than the merely romantic novelist ever goes — lies in his feeling that a fiddler, one who gains money and friends by music — is an inferior and unworthy creature, of no real use in the world. Only at the end of the book does he realize that this is not so:

that every particular of my life has been strong except for my own deep-held mistake, my youthful idea that fiddling was a cheap expedient for gaining comforts without fighting for them. It has come to me that that is not so. It is a gift that must be perfected at the cost of continual struggle and polished momentarily.

Ivanhoe is helped to this truer vision of himself through his love for Evelyn Dunshee, the percep-

tive daughter of a magnate of nascent Iowa. Ivanhoe has undertaken a war against this man, precipitated by his experience with a mattress in the hostelry owned by the magnate. The complications of this final section of the book are appropriately the most entertaining of them all.

Stong's lusty humor and power of phrase are richly illustrated in *Ivanhoe Keeler*. Breakfast at the magnate's house — who is entertaining Governor Briggs but has been compelled by circumstances to assign his best bed to Ivanhoe Keeler — will illustrate both qualities and also the rich vein of authentic social history which marks all of Stong's glimpses of early Iowa in these novels:

He went into the dining room gaily. It would have been a reflection on Sammy's various skills if he had not been the best-dressed and groomed man in the room. The governor and the intimates who were traveling with him were still working through an enormous Iowa breakfast — buckwheat cakes, sausages and bacon with eggs, pork-chops or steaks and potato cakes with hominy, lots of coffee and open-face apple pie made from tart dried apples. A duty of the good politician in the time and place was to be a hearty eater and Briggs, with a platter of breakfast steaks in plain view, was taking a second helping of sausages, eggs, potatoes and gravy.

Evelyn, the weak vessel, was toying with a reasonable slab of pie on which she had poured thick cream.

There is similar good reading in *Forty Pounds of Gold*. James Warwick is by no means so glamorous a figure as is Ivanhoe Keeler, and his ad-

ventures have less of gallant fantasy about them. He is the sort of man who goes to California for forty pounds of gold and gets it, even though to do so means raising onions and building "cradles," for use by other gold diggers. He too attracts companions — a pair of game and hardbitten young adventurers like himself. The Gold Rush passage across Panama can hardly have been narrated so ably anywhere else as it is in this book. For our purpose there is too little of Iowa: the story begins and ends there, that is all. The quality of Phil Stong's treatment of Iowa's earliest days makes me hope devoutly that he will turn to this material again.

When we used to stack grain in Iowa, we liked to have good, straight bundles for topping out the stack. We could hardly have a better bundle, to round out our survey of fiction of earliest Iowa, than Phil Stong's *Buckskin Breeches*. This is one of the best of Stong's books, and indeed it is one of the very bright spots in the whole range of Iowa literature.

Buckskin Breeches is a novel of the migration into Iowa (then a part of Wisconsin Territory) after the Black Hawk wars and as soon as the land was opened for settlement. The story begins in Ohio, and the major dramatic forces are set in motion there. The covered-wagon journey is narrated, across Indiana and Illinois. But nearly half of the book's pages are given to experiences at

the western fringe of settlement in south-eastern Iowa, at the very beginnings.

As is appropriate for a novel of the westward movement, this is a family story. Almost equally important in the tale are Jesse Ellison, Indian fighter in the War of 1812, now a tavernkeeper who loathes the tavern; his wife Margaret, "once of polite Cincinnati;" and their daughter and three sons. Also of major importance are Eli Ledom, Jesse's old friend and fellow-veteran of the Indian wars; Dr. Elmer Newton, young transcendentalist-tinged minister from Boston who imagines himself in love with Margaret; and two girls, one who almost snares the oldest Ellison boy before his departure from Ohio, the other whom he marries in Iowa. In fact this novel is singularly rich in knowable and likable human beings, portrayed with sharp insight and also with deep sympathy.

Jesse Ellison seems to me, fresh from rereading *Buckskin Breeches*, perhaps the most powerfully rendered character in all Stong's fiction. He is not wholly revealed; there remains a core of mystery, the inmost man not known to any other or completely to himself — a quality which marks the strongest characters of some of the world's best fiction, that of Joseph Conrad for example. His skills, his courage, his cultural attainments — a quoter of Greek poetry and philosophy on the frontier — have an aura of the romantic: until we remind ourselves of what stuff some of the actual

founders of Iowa were made. Margaret Ellison also seems to me very finely and truly conceived and portrayed. Certainly she is one of the best of Stong's feminine characters. Her motive in the migration, with a husband of whom she isn't sure whether she loves or hates — "Not only for the children — for my own self-respect" — is valid as illumination of her conduct both in Ohio and in Iowa.

Easily to be overlooked in *Buckskin Breeches*, in the charm of the characters and the vigorous flow of the story, is Stong's very substantial grasp of all facets of Iowa's earliest history, including the economic and political as well as the social. A case in point is his handling of the Burlington land sales. The Ellisons and their neighbors — the first-comers — had chosen and marked out the lands on which they made their clearings and built their homes, before provision had been made for actual transfer of these lands from the federal government to the settlers. When finally government agents came to Burlington to hold a public auction of the newly opened lands, the settlers were ready to buy the lands they had claimed at the established minimum price of \$1.25 per acre — though some had to borrow money at 100% to do so. However, many speculators, knowing the richness of these lands, flocked to the sale and were prepared to offer higher prices. In defense of what they considered their rights, the settlers

attended the auction *en masse*, heavily and obviously armed, to the very effective discouragement of the would-be speculators. Stong's graphic narrative of this incident reveals its grave potentialities of disaster and defeat for the settlers, while at the same time realizing delightfully its comic aspects.

Young [Augustus Caesar] Dodge shouted and Ioway was being sold. "Gentlemen, the first parcel. Let's hear, gentlemen, let's hear!"

The noise dwindled off.

"Township sixty-nine — range ten — your bids, gentlemen."

"One-twenty-five."

"One-twenty-five is bid. Let's hear you, gentlemen!"

"Yay, let's hear you," said Ollivant.

"One-twenty-five — one-twenty-five — and sold to — James Duffield."

The fateful speech of the day was "one-twenty-five." When that bid was made the speculators, scattered about in the rudest clothes they could find, knew that a further bid would single them out for attention in the way of assault at the moment and for murder or mayhem after the auction was closed.

It was all very decorous. There was hot bidding among the speculators for tracts which were not stamped with "one-twenty-five" — unsettled bits. But there was always a proper interval for a "one-twenty-five" bid and after a while the auctioneer did not bother to go further.

Phil Stong's capacity to enter into the immediate impressions and emotions of his characters — taking his reader with him — is illustrated in the

memorable first sentences of Part Three of *Buckskin Breeches*. It is this portion of the book, subtitled "The Cabin," which tells of the experiences of the Ellisons after their actual arrival in Iowa.

They were all surprised to find that Ioway did not extend in an endless prairie from the Mississippi at their feet. Instead, they found an undulating woodland, prickly-backed with the leafless trees, cut with respectable streams and ravines, and bordered with long, rounded hills on its horizons. . . . The trail was principally marked by disastrous mudholes. The long, dead grass hardly bore the imprint of a wheel on the high ground, but in the swales the passage of three or four wagons could have, and had, made morasses, inadequately frozen. After ten hours of bitter labor, mud, loadings and unloadings, cold without and perilous jolting and bumping within, they were not yet out of sight of the Mississippi — four or five miles for the day.

The deeper penetration of the novelist, into inner experience which the character himself recognizes as significant, marks the oldest Ellison boy's first real understanding of the meaning of the migration.

"But —" It was almost on his lips that he would shortly turn around and go back. He smothered the speech and for a moment tried to realize the feeling of one who had come to this fantastic wilderness to live forever. For the first time he got the full meaning that his father and mother and Sue and Ted and Hi meant to stay here and exercise whatever force their lives might have against these untracked lands and stubborn forests. Next year they would be here — in twenty years — in fifty they would be here, dead or living.

It was then that the whole journey quickly became uncompromisingly actual to David for the first time. None of these people would return — the voyage ended at its western limit.

The lesser characters of *Buckskin Breeches* are seen for the most part externally, but with sharpness of detail and sureness of phrase that give them vitality. Stong's description of the home of the frontier trader, Philp Fursten — German born and cultured — and his thrifty wife expresses at once the man and the time and place.

The first glimpse of the great cabin room made evident the nature of the frontier and the trader. There was, indeed, a suggestion of an earlier life of Philip Fursten's that had been substantially luxurious — the shining, carved table; the brocaded chairs; the fireplace niches lined with books in rich leather, gold stamped — but the bed in the corner was hewn hickory and the enormous feather beds were supported on rope lashings. The long bench before the fireplace was beautifully worked, but it was the common timber of the country — black walnut. The floor was carpeted with bearhides except for the less valuable deerskins at dangerous points near the fire. From the rafters hung smoked hams and joints, sweet corn, onions, jerked beef and venison in long strips — enough to take an army through the winter. In the cool corner of the room was marshaled a regiment of barrels, casks, and jugs, all cradled and spigoted.

Some of the characters developed more fully in others of Stong's books are first seen in this novel — Ivanhoe Keeler, for example. Indeed, *Buckskin Breeches* is the foundation of his whole "Pitts-

ville'' series. The richness of vivid detail and the robust humor which are always characteristic of Stong's work mark this book in especially generous measure. *Buckskin Breeches* is a genuinely worthy literary interpretation of the founding of Iowa and of the people who achieved it.

The writers who have looked to earliest Iowa for the substance of fiction have demonstrated the literary potentialities of that period of the history of the state and the region. From the shadowed and tragic figure of Black Hawk and the self-tortured Paul Boudreau to keen-minded Jesse Ellison and the ebullient Ivanhoe Keeler, they have brought to the fellowship of readers a varied and goodly company. It is no small or unworthy part of Iowa literature, this achievement of the novelists who have written of the very early times.

JOHN T. FREDERICK

SOME WRITINGS ON IOWA LITERARY FIGURES AND THEIR WORK

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