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 sruggle 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