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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.

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