

The Midland

In the second decade of the Twentieth Century there was an outburst of small and individualistic periodicals that came to be known as "little magazines." Just what was this "little magazine?" It is difficult to "cabin, crib, confine, or bind" the lot of them within one definition. Their essence was diversity. Usually, but not always, their issues were physically "little;" very often they were short-lived, but not always; most of them, but not all, represented the voices of individual editors, or of small groups. Often they gave special care to their typography, and were pleasing to the eye. Nearly all of them boasted of being "non-commercial," which meant that although they charged a modest subscription price and printed advertisements when they could get them, they paid nothing to their contributors and were happy if they took in enough to pay their printers more or less regularly. Some of these "little" magazines were wholly devoted to poetry, some to literary criticism, some to experimental writing, some to the propagation of radical social and political doctrine. And a flock of them simply defied classification.

We still have "little magazines" today, of course; but they are now generally endowed by

institutions or groups, and thus they differ from the highly individualized rabble of little publications, mostly rebels of one kind or another, and mostly teetering on the edge of extinction, that I observed with interest forty and fifty years ago.

In 1915, for example, there were twelve "little magazines" founded, of which seven lasted for a year or less. Only two outlasted four years. Longest-lived of the twelve started in that year of 1915 was the *Midland*, of Iowa City. It is of this magazine and its editor, John Towner Frederick, that I wish to write here.

I cannot prove it, but I have long thought it probable that Josiah Royce, the Harvard philosopher, planted the seed that later flowered in the *Midland*. He came out to the State University of Iowa in 1902 to give the Phi Beta Kappa address, and on that occasion he said some things about "The Higher Provincialism" that not only attracted wide attention but made a deep impression on his audience in Iowa City. What he wanted was a genuine provincial spirit to hold the line against the encroachments of national industrialism. His utterance was an early warning against the abuses of what was later to be called "mass culture." Among his hearers, undoubtedly, was Clarke F. Ansley, head of the University's department of English, who became an exponent, year after year, of the new regionalism in American literature.

Eventually a group of Ansley's young men became imbued with the idea of founding, right there in Iowa City, a magazine of belles-lettres that might become a rallying point for Midwestern culture. I must not force my thesis too far, but I seem to hear some echo of Royce in the *Midland's* first editorial:

Possibly the region between the mountains would gain in variety at least if it retained more of its makers of literature, music, pictures, and other expressions of civilization, and possibly civilization itself might be with us a somewhat swifter process if expression of its spirit were more frequent.

If the *Midland* created a sensation in the Iowa cornlands, it was a mild one indeed. The *cognoscenti* approved, and enough sent in their names, accompanied by a dollar and a half, to encourage the young entrepreneurs. And there were encouraging words, with checks, from Chicago, from the Iowa colony in California, and even from New York. Not many checks, but enough to pay modest printing bills — or almost enough.

I read the magazine from its first number. Already an enthusiastic follower of the new Midwestern literary movement, I was deeply sympathetic with what the Iowa City group was doing. The *Midland* was two years old when I wrote an article about it for my weekly newspaper, thereby attracting the attention of Editor Frederick. Thus fortuitously began one of the most valued friend-

ships of my life. Our correspondence for a few years was desultory, but in 1920 I sent him the manuscript of a short story called "The Man With the Good Face," and that eventually brought us closer together.

Most young newspaper men in those days were experimenting with novels and short stories. Many were turning out imitations of O. Henry, and I had my turn at that game. Only three of my stories had been published, however, and I had a big collection of rejection slips, when I wrote the "Good Face" story. This, I felt, was something different. I sent it to a New York literary agent named Holly, with a two-dollar reading fee; and he replied as follows: "I regret to report that I cannot see a sale for it. . . . It has an unhealthy and morbid theme." But John Frederick did not agree. He immediately accepted the story for the *Midland*, made a few helpful suggestions for improvements (he was always doing that for his contributors), and published it in his magazine in December, 1920. Then Edward J. O'Brien reprinted it in his *Best Short Stories* volume for 1921, and anthologists picked it up from there, and so on.

But the point is that "The Man With the Good Face" got me into the *Midland* group; and when I joined the English faculty at Iowa in 1921, Frederick invited me to become an associate editor and three years later co-editor of the magazine.

A little later I undertook half of the financial and management responsibility as well, though there was no transfer of ownership; the *Midland* was Frederick's. Never was there a happier partnership. The editors agreed basically in theory and nearly always in taste, and differed enough to make them check on one another.

Fairly tall and spare in figure, with a prominent nose in a lean and irregularly fashioned face, John Frederick was no Adonis; but there was something about him that always commanded respect. I think it was Virginia Woolf who once visited the Iowa campus and later wrote in the *Freeman* or *New Republic* a piece about Frederick that described him as "Lincolnian." That rather embarrassed him, and it was not quite right because it placed him in a heroic pose unnatural to him. Nobody on the campus was less pretentious. Kindly and sympathetic, with a ready sense of humor, Frederick maintained always a certain modest reserve of dignity. Many of his students had an admiration for him that stopped just this side of idolatry.

John and I shared the task of "first reader" equally. The clearly impossible manuscripts we returned directly with rejection form 1, 2 or 3. To the others we attached notes and then exchanged them, so that both of us read those that seemed to have possibilities. Most of our reading of manuscripts was done at home, of course, and once a

week we would have a consultation and make some decisions. John wrote hundreds of letters and notes to would-be contributors, scribbling them by hand; he was always understanding, sympathetic, and constructive in his suggestions. He could remove the sting from a rejection by a kind of epistolary surgery, and make a young writer thank him for sending a manuscript back. I came to join in this task of correspondence with writers, and found it an experience full of curious twists and surprises.

As I recall, we commonly received ten or a dozen contributions a day. Eventually, the University supplied us with a half-time assistant to do the clerical work — and sometimes more than the merely clerical. Some of these were young people of unusual talent and ability; I remember especially Harry Hartwick, Ruth Lechlitner, and Charles Brown Nelson.

One factor that helped us to attract good writers in spite of the fact that we paid nothing in cash for contributions was the consistent support of Edward J. O'Brien, who began the compilation of his year-book of *Best Short Stories* in the year in which the *Midland* was founded. In the introduction to his first volume, O'Brien wrote:

One new periodical . . . claims unique attention this year for recent achievement and abundant future promise. A year ago a slender little monthly magazine entitled *The Midland* was first issued. It attracted very little attention,

and in the course of a year published but ten short stories. It has been my pleasure and wonder to find in these ten stories the most vital interpretation in fiction of our national life that many years have been able to show. Since the most brilliant days of the New England men of letters, no such hope has proclaimed itself with such assurance and modesty.

In succeeding volumes O'Brien continued to deal kindly with the *Midland*. His year-book was a combination anthology, index, and rating-table. He apparently read and rated thousands of stories each year. To the "distinctive" ones he awarded a star, while even better ones got two stars, and those he thought were the very best received three stars. It was a great period for the short story, and O'Brien was its prophet. To be starred in his annual was success, and to be three-starred or reprinted there was fame. Many *Midland* stories were three-starred by O'Brien, and he sometimes reprinted as many as three of them in one of his volumes. And so it came about that writers who could get cash for their stories from other magazines often sent us their manuscripts in the hope of an O'Brien accolade. Too often, it must be added, these were formula stories that did not suit us — and, by the same token, would not have pleased the discriminating O'Brien.

The *Midland* found some good authors, however; and as I glance over the twenty bound volumes on my shelves, I find myself tingling with

the memory of the discoveries of those years. And I note that the magazine was never quite as regional as it had set out to be. It printed the Iowa stories of Ruth Suckow, the Missouri sketches of Raymond Weeks, the Hoosier tales of Leo L. Ward, Chicago pieces by James T. Farrell, and the Nebraska poems of Edwin Ford Piper; but also some wonderful things William March sent from New York and Leonard Cline from Baltimore and other points, poems by Haniel Long from Pittsburgh, the prose and verse of Howard Mumford Jones coming from Texas, Roland English Hartley's stories mailed at San Francisco, and poems and stories of Raymond Knister and Leyland Huckfield from Canada. Moreover, these authors moved about in this great country; Miss Suckow went to live in the East, Weeks became head of Romance Languages at Columbia and Jones dean of the graduate school at Michigan and then at Harvard. Piper and Knister came to Iowa, and Haniel Long took up residence at Santa Fe. It was as though they were conspiring to spoof the idea of a definitely regional magazine. Meantime the *Midland* was always delighted to print distinguished stories and good verse wherever they came from; yet it remained true to its name through its emphasis on the life of the Middle West.

I shared the editing and management of the *Midland* with John Frederick for five years. Our

circulation most of the time was only about five hundred, at three dollars a year. The design and careful printing of the magazine were chiefly due to John Springer, an artist with types who had once edited a newspaper and represented his county in the state legislature. When I knew him he worked for Willis Mercer, our printer, and shambled about looking like a faded replica of Mark Twain. But he had a keen eye for the beauty of a printed page. Mercer was the most generous of printers, and took a deep personal interest in the magazine; we paid him what now seems the unbelievable small sum of a hundred dollars a month, which certainly allowed him little or no profit. Thus we managed to break about even in these years.

But in the optimistic climate of the late Twenties, it seemed to many that the *Midland* should be making more of its opportunities. In the introduction to his short story year-book for 1930, O'Brien urged the several regional periodicals to merge with the *Midland* "to issue a full-grown national monthly of belles-lettres." He added:

If the *Midland* chooses to take the lead in this matter, I am convinced, after many years' reflection, that it has the same opportunity to crystalize the best expression of contemporary national life that the *Atlantic Monthly* was able to seize upon its foundation, and that *Harper's Magazine* enjoyed a generation ago. Two generations ago, Boston was the geographical center of American literary life; one generation ago, New York could claim pride of place; and

I trust the idea will not seem too unfamiliar if I suggest that the geographical center today is Iowa City.

Frederick had been thinking along the same lines for a year or more. He was not much interested in mergers, however; and he decided, after correspondence with generous-sounding friends in Chicago, to move the *Midland* to that metropolis. Here was the great city of the Midwest, which had recently developed strong enough groups to support the Art Museum, the symphony orchestra, the magazine *Poetry*, and other cultural institutions.

I was by this time deeply engaged with the School of Journalism at Iowa, and could not think of accompanying the magazine in its great adventure. I could only give it my blessing, and the promise to stay on as an associate editor. John and I dissolved our partnership as informally as we had initiated it, without payments, promises, or documents.

In Chicago the *Midland* was for a time livelier and more attractive than ever before. Esther Paulus Frederick became co-editor. But the crash of falling stocks, the closing of banks, and the abrupt end of an era of buoyancy and sanguine expectations had combined to greet the magazine on its coming to the big town. Chicago friends who had spoken generous words in greeting it suddenly added up their assets and found words were all they had to be generous with. "The

fourth year of the depression proves to be one year too many for the *Midland*," wrote Frederick in June, 1933, as he sent off the copy for the last issue.

Henry L. Mencken once made the statement that the *Midland* was "probably the most important literary magazine ever established in America." This was typical Menckenesque, of course; but there was a time when the magazine — "our" magazine, I like to call it — stood very high in the estimation of many discriminating critics. I was fully rewarded for the many hours of work I gave it by the satisfaction of helping to publish some good literature and making friendships that I still value.

I realize that all I have here written of John Frederick has been in the past tense, and that this may have given the impression that he had shuffled off by now this mortal coil. By no means. I have been telling of a departed time, not a departed man. Frederick has written two distinguished novels of Midwestern life — *Druida* and *Green Bush* — and he has followed his bent for farming on a big place in Alcona County, Michigan. For a time he was associated with the "Contemporary Thought" program at Northwestern University, also acting occasionally as a visiting lecturer at Notre Dame. Later he made a custom of serving half a year at the latter university and spending the other half on the farm; then, after the death of

Father Ward, he was named head of the very lively English department there. After his retirement, now imminent, he will doubtless continue and expand his writing, which has been, for John Frederick, a lifelong and compulsive activity.

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