

The Midland Monthly

The comparative leisure of his months abroad, and the long hours on shipboard, as the Brighams returned from Aix La Chapelle, gave Johnson Brigham the opportunity of considering a new project. Feeling deeply that the time had come when the Midwest should have an outlet for critical and literary expression, he wanted to edit a magazine that would fulfill this purpose. On the few occasions when he had broached the subject to his friends, he was told emphatically that the time was not ripe for such a periodical; others said flatly that the whole idea was fantastic. The dream, however, continued to urge Johnson Brigham on to the creation of the *Midland Monthly*.

In his mind he had set up definite goals for this magazine. He felt that the Middle West and Iowa in particular should realize that the region already possessed a past. As a state Iowa was approaching her half-century mark. She possessed Indian legends and stories of frontier chicanery as well as of dogged heroism which needed to be set down in permanent form. In another way he felt that such a magazine would both explain to other regions Iowa's and the Midwest's prowess in education and culture and furnish an outlet for Midwestern

talents. For this enterprise most of Johnson Brigham's life had been a preparation. Always a great reader, for twenty years he had written many critical articles for his New York papers, and more for the *Republican*.

In family conference at Cedar Rapids, the magazine was named the *Midland Monthly*. Des Moines, because of its central position in the state and its advantages in supplying advertising material, was selected as the place of publication. Late in the fall of 1893 the Brighams took up their residence in Des Moines, and in January of 1894 the first issue of the *Midland Monthly* appeared in a heavy, slate-blue cover. Johnson Brigham could well take pride in this initial number. It contained a story by Alice French, nine grass-roots lyrics of Hamlin Garland's, a reprint of Major S. H. M. Byers' "Sherman's March to the Sea" with a detailed account of its composition by the author, and an appreciation of "Father Clarkson" of the *Des Moines Register*, written by Cyrenus Cole.

Consistently Johnson Brigham drew in contributions from men and women who were well known in the state and the nation. Among these were Senators William B. Allison, James Harlan, and Jonathan P. Dolliver; J. Christian Bay, later librarian of the John Crerar Library in Chicago; newspapermen like Cyrenus Cole, Harvey Ingham, Irving B. Richman, and Henry Wallace, Sr.; and prominent educators like W. W. Gist, Lewis

Worthington Smith, Samuel Calvin, and Seldon Whitcomb. Johnson Brigham possessed, too, an uncanny faculty in recognizing talent in writers who were then unknown to the reading public. He, therefore, welcomed contributions from Albert Bigelow Paine, future biographer of Mark Twain; Emerson Hough; and Ellis Parker Butler, whose "Pigs Is Pigs" later brought him fame.

Starting the *Midland Monthly* in 1894 in a period of a great national depression, Johnson Brigham found the financial obligations oppressive. In the absence of capital he utilized every possible means to keep the magazine on a paying basis. The subscription list from four "little magazines" helped to strengthen the *Midland*, which in 1894 was able to absorb *The Literary Northwest*; in 1896, *Tainter's Magazine* and *The New Bohemian*; and in 1898, *Illustrated Iowa*. These had been published respectively in St. Paul, Galena, Cincinnati, and Des Moines. While these annexations served to increase the subscription lists, they were also indicative of a widespread interest during the late nineties in creative and critical writings throughout the Midwest.

By introducing two sections in the *Midland Monthly*, called "Editorial Comment" and "The Midland Book Table," Johnson Brigham made the magazine truly critical. In these he commented on contemporary articles in magazines and on current books written by Walt Whitman, Mark Twain,

James Whitcomb Riley, Eugene Field, and Lafcadio Hearn. English writers, such as Sir James Barrie and Mrs. Humphry Ward, and French authors of the caliber of George Sand, Emile Zola, and Alphonse Daudet were criticized.

Two other interests tied his few years with the *Midland Monthly* with his work as state librarian; first he championed the aims and ideals of the Women's Clubs, and secondly he advocated better library facilities in the state. In 1895 Johnson Brigham asked Mrs. Harriet B. Towner of Corning, Iowa, to edit a section in the magazine called "Women's Club Notes." Both Mrs. Towner and her husband, State Senator Horace Towner, were deeply interested in supplying the people of Iowa with more books. In her column and in her addresses before district and state conventions, she kept the idea before the Women's Clubs. And in the legislature in 1896, Senator Towner introduced a bill to create state-supported traveling libraries. There is little doubt that Brigham's support of the Towners had much to do with his appointment in 1898 as State Librarian of Iowa.

With a limited personal income and with no subsidies for his magazine, Johnson Brigham fought an uphill financial battle for nearly five years. Though eastern magazines and his own clientele lauded the *Midland* highly, and although Des Moines businessmen generously contributed their support, yet the time came in 1898 when

Johnson Brigham felt it best to sell the magazine to a St. Louis syndicate. Perhaps if Governor Leslie Shaw had not appointed him State Librarian, Brigham might have kept the *Midland* running for a longer life span. The St. Louis people, however, put out just a few numbers, and the *Midland Monthly* was no more.

As years go by, Johnson Brigham's *Midland Monthly* will rank as an important creative and cultural achievement in Iowa's early history. The editor, the Nestor of Iowa's literary magazines, achieved one of his goals, that of creating a literary organ that made Iowa critically conscious of itself and of its writers.

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