

HERBERT QUICK: ART AND IOWA

By P. L. REED

IN *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, Frederick J. Hoffman noted that "the fictional exploitation of all aspects of the American past was especially lively 'during the decade' and that by far the most popular single subject for historical novels of the period was the westward movement." Likewise, in a section entitled "The Midwest as Metaphor," Hoffman discussed the phenomenon of the Midwestern writers who had to leave for the East or Paris (Floyd Dell, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, to name only a few). "The Middle West had become a metaphor of abuse; it was on the one hand a rural metaphor, of farms, villages, and small towns; on the other, a middle-class metaphor, of conventions, piety and hypocrisy, tastelessness and spiritual poverty" (p. 184, note 44; pp. 369-77).

The Iowa trilogy of Herbert Quick, written in the first half of the twenties, matched this metaphor only in that it treated the settlement and growth of the state. In depicting Iowa life, Quick saw things to criticize (the economic and political exploitation of the farmer, the lack of opportunity for the aspiring young writer), but he wished to chronicle first. His regionalist impulse centered upon recording history in fiction and suggesting change through growth rather than upon indicting or escaping. Although he left the Midwest for government work in Washington during World War I and lived until his death in 1925 on a farm in West

Virginia, his heart never left rural Iowa. He saw no better world elsewhere. The Midwest, as he viewed it, could cure its own ills, and what was wrong there was only part of the whole. His novels were devoted to the healthy whole.

I

On April 28, 1924, Quick wrote to a critic: "After I published my first really successful novel—*Double Trouble* away back in 1906; I locked my law office door on the outside, and became a writer by profession. This was at the early age—for a Dutchman—of 45. . . . I always got along. When the fiction failed, I took up editorial work. . . . I am now just finishing far the best novel I ever wrote"—*The Invisible Woman*, the final book of his trilogy about Iowa life roughly from 1850 to 1900 (letter to Frederic F. Van de Water, April 28, 1924). The modest "success" of *Double Trouble*, a popular romance the melodramatic machinery of which turned on the idea of the split personality, was financial rather than literary. (The book sold 18,109 copies of the regular edition during the first year of publication, though little thereafter.) The novels of the trilogy (or at least the first two), however, were, as Quick's statement implies, esthetic as well as financial successes, though they were only briefly best-sellers and none sold extremely well. *Vandemark's Folly* (1922) sold 30,677 copies in the year after publication; sales of *The Hawkeye* (1923) reached 36,209 copies six months after publication, though virtually no sales occurred thereafter; but *The Invisible Woman* sold only about 14,500 copies of the regular edition during the fifteen months after its publication in October, 1924. All three novels were serialized in the *Ladies' Home Journal* prior to their publication in book form.

Still, the impulse which produced Quick's later work was genuinely esthetic. He spoke often with pride of being a writer. (As teacher, lawyer, and politician he signed his name "J. H. Quick"; as a writer, "Herbert Quick".) His comments in correspondence with the Bobbs-Merrill Company show that he was concerned first with the techniques of writing fiction to express what he himself had to say and second with the techniques of writing to sell.

The formal success of Quick's trilogy stems largely from his finding a fictional mode to suit his purpose, to "cover the history of Iowa from its early settlement to recent times" (to W. C. Bobbs, February 26, 1921). After finishing *Vandemark's Folly*, he wrote to Bobbs on February 26, 1921:

The first [novel] . . . is the way things look and happen to a green boy settling in Iowa in the fifties. It is a cross-section of the life of a boy born in southeastern New York in 1837 and takes in life on the Erie Canal, the factory life of the day, the things people thought and did, and the great flood of immigration into the midwest. It sees only what a boy of that sort could see struggling with life, on the trail, and on the prairie farm. It has the lost prairie of Iowa in it. . . . I think it a good story. But in it I have prepared the way for the stories which will follow. The three will constitute a single work, and will be the story of Iowa, and the whole Middle West. It will be a sort of prose epic of the greatest thing in history of its kind. I lived this life, and am the only writing man who did. Garland did not live it, nor did Hough, though the former was born in Wisconsin, and the latter in Illinois. [Quick is mistaken; Hough was born in Iowa.] I was of the thing, as they were not. The story I have finished is a mingling of the life of my father, of my wife's father, our relatives, and neighbors. The second will be in some measure my own history and experiences. I have done a great deal of real work on the story written, that it

may really be true. All the books will titivate the interest of Iowa people particularly as they will be to a very great extent historical. The books will be discussed.

In spite of Quick's nod in the last two sentences toward sales (in the letter he was jockeying with Bobbs for a higher royalty), he reveals here the sense of mission, even duty, he felt to present to the world the history of his region. Moreover, because they coincided in time, the history of Iowa was synonymous in his mind with the life of Herbert Quick. Such expansion of ego by association could only result in the author's visualizing himself within his fiction. Quick's persona appears first in *Vandemark's Folly* as J. T. Vandemark, an old settler, who writes "the History of Vandemark Township" in the first person; then in *The Hawkeye* as Fremont McConkey, "a middle-aged man" and aspiring writer, who completes "the History of Monterey County" with McConkey as its main character before he reveals that the "he" of the story "has really meant 'I.' " The progressive sophistication in technique continued through *The Invisible Woman*, where Quick attempted to abandon the strict autobiographical mode and write "a real novel" (to H. H. Howland, January 12, 1924), but failed to break his former habit. These novels were the final products of Quick's career as a writer (except, appropriately, for an incomplete autobiography of which one volume was published posthumously), and the germs of their narrative technique as well as their subject matter are present in earlier pieces of writing.

II

After a boyhood on farms in Iowa, Quick's first profession was teaching in rural schools, then towns. Later as a lawyer, politician, and editor of rural journals, his efforts

were devoted to improving farm life and attacking corruption in local government. These efforts allied him with the Progressive movement, and he held for a time the associate editorship of *LaFollette's Magazine* for Senator Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin. However, notes for Quick's projected autobiography indicate that editorial work was originally a substitute for fiction because his novel, *The Broken Lance*, 1907, failed to earn him enough. He wrote to Howland on March 16, 1910, ". . . I am incubating great novels. Sat in the University club in Milwaukee last night and grew greatly excited discussing with a friend a series of three novels—finest creations of the mid-continent mews," and elsewhere claimed that he had planned the Iowa series before the age of twenty (to Frederic F. Van de Water, April 28, 1924). Yet he did not begin writing the first volume until 1917. Editorial work saved him financially and provided an outlet for didactic prose. If not fiction, he was writing, and his progress toward the Iowa trilogy can be traced through two preliminary stages.

After *Double Trouble*, Quick's next mildly successful seller with Bobbs-Merrill was *The Brown Mouse*, 1915. A narrative which thinly disguises a treatise on making the rural school more effective, the book presented no claim to greatness. Quick said of it in a letter, "I once wrote a calm little story with an educational sermon in it for *Farm and Fireside*, in which as editor I felt bound to turn down all the hectic stuff which we had been using, and against the judgment of the New York crowd . . . because it was too mild" (to S. S. McClure, July 15, 1922, in the McClure Mss., the Lilly Library). When he submitted the manuscript to Bobbs-Merrill, he wrote:

. . . I don't think it will get me any eternal fame, but it has one or two points with which I am pretty well satisfied. First, it is a serious contribution to a subject which is fundamentally important, and unlike some of my economic views [he was an ardent follower of Henry George and strong on the Single Tax], the world will sympathize with this book and accept its leadings as going in the right direction. Secondly, I think you can sell it. I believe it is one of those books, published once in a generation, in which acceptable tendencies in education are embodied in an acceptable story. Such books never fail as far as sales are concerned (to Howland, March 31, 1915).

The book did sell 30,000 copies in ten years, mainly to educational groups. Thus in 1922 Quick could boast that *The Brown Mouse* "turned out the best puller we had ever had, and is now a recognized educational classic in use wherever education is studied."

Immediate reader reaction was favorable; the use of a sentimental plot to spark interest in Quick's "sermon" seems to have worked. But readers apparently liked the fiction as such. In referring to a letter from an appreciative reader, Quick wrote to Howland on April 16, 1915, "I really think it [*The Brown Mouse*] is straight fiction for our purpose. My reason for thinking so is because it produces the effect of straight fiction." And on April 20, Howland replied, "It has a fictional value in a very subtle and unusual way. I can't analyze it but I feel it and that's far more important." Favorable reactions from "city people" prompted Quick to write that ". . . the book has ordinary-novel possibilities" (to D. L. Chambers, December 23, 1915); and, finally, in a reply to a college professor interested in dramatizing and producing *The Brown Mouse* on the stage, he said, ". . . I believe that through the Brown Mouse idea a new art, dramatic, literary and poetic will

eventually grow up in the country. By the Brown Mouse idea I mean the lifting of rural problems and rural life up to their proper intellectual level and the vitalization of local things" (to Professor A. G. Arnold, November 8, 1915, University of North Dakota). In light of the obvious relevance of this last statement to the motive of the Iowa novels, it must be supposed that the warm reception of *The Brown Mouse* carried Quick a step nearer the trilogy. He had produced a kind of "literature" out of local materials, stock melodrama, and didactic purpose—and he obviously wanted to believe that he had written "straight fiction." The same ingredients would form the substance of his trilogy.

If Quick discovered the substance of regional fiction in *The Brown Mouse*, he found the autobiographical method, as well as an elementary technique for handling a large bulk of material, in a series of unsigned articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1916. (They were published as *The Fairview Idea* by Bobbs-Merrill in 1918.) Each article dealt with a specific aspect of rural life or an individual in the farming community: "the retired farmer . . . the country church . . . the rural school . . . the farmer's wife . . . the country boy . . . the country girl . . . the bookfarmer . . . the back-to-the-lander . . . the county agent . . . the landlord and tenant question . . ." (to Howland, April 19, 1916). Quick described the work as "semi-fiction, told in the first person."

In a letter to Bobbs on February 12, 1917, Quick attempted to justify the collection as a whole, hoping the firm would publish it:

[The articles] . . . deal with almost every big nationwide problem of rural life, and embody pretty completely my philosophy of rural betterment—a philosophy, I think I am justified in saying, which is at this time affecting more minds

than the thoughts of any other man in America. They constitute a rounding out of the study which I made in *The Brown Mouse*. They have all the interest of a novel, in view of the fact that they are all told in the first person, by Uncle Abner Dunham, an old resident farmer of the Fairview neighborhood, and in every story the main character, Uncle Abner and his wife, Tome Whelpley, the schoolmaster; Frank Wiggins and Daisy, his wife; Adolph Tulp, a German; and others appear and reappear, so that the thing possesses continuity of interest. I do not think I have done anything better.

Quick had now populated the community of his idea (the projection of his influence on the "minds" of America indicates the size that idea assumed for him) and had given his collection unity through a set of characters and a presiding voice. His estimate of the quality of his work reveals that his development is taking a desirable path and, perhaps, that he is prepared for the goal of writing the Iowa novels. He wrote to H. H. Howland on May 1, 1917, with obvious pleasure, that he had been getting letters from readers of the *Post* articles, letters "addressed to the *Saturday Evening Post* and to the unknown author of these articles, frequently under such terms as 'Dear Uncle Abner.' " He had discovered the narrative persona. As further evidence that Quick had reached the point where he could begin the trilogy, he did not send Bobbs-Merrill the revised manuscript of *The Fairview Idea* until May 1, 1917; yet he wrote to Howland on March 15, "The trilogy of which we have talked is growing on me all the time and taking form in my mind. All I need to do now is to put it on paper." On March 20 he added, ". . . incidentally, I wrote three or four pages of the first chapter of the first volume of the Great Trilogy."

III

In 1918 Quick wrote that the Iowa novels would constitute his "principal bid for fame" (to Chambers, May 14, 1918). His personal involvement in the books had become enormous. In 1921 he described *Vandemark's Folly* as ". . . a piece of work that I have long felt I owed to the mid-west and to the mid-westerners wherever they may be. . . . It is the story of my father's time, and the time of the fathers and mothers and grandparents of many thousands of people from twenty to sixty years old. While it begins earlier than any memories of mine of the prairies, it does embody my own memories." Thus it had become his *duty* to write this book, for earlier times were part of his inheritance. Further, he says, "The life in New York and along the canal in the earlier portions of the book is historically accurate. My father and mother and my grandparents, and my wife's parents and grandparents lived in New York state during these years. I got the cottonmill facts from an old man who knew from having worked in the mills. He was eighty-five years old. The canal life is from a hired man who used to come to Iowa and work in the harvest field with me on my father's Iowa farm year after year, and talked all the time of life on the canal" (to Howland, December 22, 1921). Thus the narrative voice in *Vandemark's Folly* is that of old settler Jacob T. Vandemark, full of old-timer reminiscences.

In a letter of December 5, 1921, to Howland, who had objected to Vandemark's insistence on writing "a history of Vandemark Township" and to the old man's frequent pauses for side-comment, Quick justified the character of his narrator: ". . . the type of man represented in the narrator must be established in the mind of the reader.

This is essential, for what is said as well as the manner of saying it is all given color and even substance by his life-long environment and the changes therein. The story is not only a narration of what one man saw taking place, but of what he did not see, and of his thoughts and his philosophy." Quick even mentions that when Vandemark ". . . begins to discuss some subjects he has a considerable scientific vocabulary. This comes from reading done on such subjects as stockbreeding and agriculture in his later years. When dealing with ordinary topics he uses short words and common ones . . . except where he falls into locutions which are preserved, and . . . in his day were still more numerously preserved, in the speech of the country people. . . . I myself have been from childhood intimately acquainted with them." Quick has carefully created his narrator's character and verbal style, but inevitably in explicit commentary he ties the man to himself.

On September 27, 1921, Quick told Howland that he had begun work on the second book in the series which would "be told by a different sort of person from Vandemark," he said. "It will really be more a personal story than the one I have written—more the things I know." Two years later he noted that ". . . the form [of the three novels] changes with the broadening of the theme. The first was purely autobiographic and individualistic. The second was only half autobiographical and somewhat more complex and extended in its character" (to Chambers, September 9, 1923). Although *The Hawkeye* does reflect the Iowa of Quick's time and the story of his own life, the broadening of social scene from the first novel to the second justifies a less limited narrative mode for the second. Such complexities as those of town living and county politics in

the later period could hardly be successfully presented through the narrow consciousness of a Vandemark. Quick saw that the wider scene demanded a wide-angled narrative viewpoint. The "I" of the autobiographer was transmuted into the controlled omniscience of the traditional novelist, though the story line of *The Hawkeye* follows McConkey's life as told by a narrator kept anonymous until the story's end.

More important, once Quick had used the strict autobiographical mode to present a "history" written by an amateur, he could hardly employ the same form to represent the work of a frustrated regional poet. *Vandemark's Folly* celebrated the virgin prairie and its pioneers; Quick rightly noted its "simplicity and elemental character" (to Howland, June 22, 1922). Explicit throughout *The Hawkeye*, however, is the "continuing struggle of a typical personality with the conditions of a great era of opportunity—for other sorts of personalities. . . . This struggle still goes on all over America between the dreamers, the visionaries and the poets, and a materialistic age" (to Chambers, November 26, 1922). Fremont McConkey ends his "History of Monterey County" with the following observation:

Iowa has been a wonderful place for certain people. . . . But Iowa has not always smiled on her dreamers, her poets, her children with the divine fire in their souls, whether much or little of it. I am just a newspaper man! And yet, I know that if the artist born in Iowa could only be allowed such a life of the soul as would impel him deeply enough, every element of great art would be found here (Quick, *The Hawkeye*, pp. 476-77).

Such was Quick's special theme; the result of his writing has to justify the claims he made for the regional writer, the Iowa "artist."

On March 22, 1923, Quick wrote to Chambers that he had been working on "the new book [*The Invisible Woman*] . . . in a general way all winter" but that actual writing might "not . . . start for a few days owing to a division of ideas as to the first chapters." On August 18 he sent Chambers the "first two chapters of the first draft" of *The Invisible Woman*, feeling that the work was "rotten stuff" and asking for the editors' opinions of his beginning. Bobbs-Merrill was pleased with what he had done, and Howland's comments indicate that his first draft was almost the same as that which appeared in published form (Howland to Quick, September 3, 1923). However, Quick's insecurity in beginning the novel stemmed from his attempted break from the autobiographical mode. Written in the third person and narrated by an almost completely disembodied narrator, this story was "far more completely socialized and generalized as to locale" (to Chambers, September 9, 1923). The scene was the whole of Iowa, together with Chicago and a suggestion of Texas, the "new frontier." Quick wrote to Howland on January 12, 1924, ". . . this book is essentially a set of character studies with dominant spiritual values. In other words, it cannot rely on historical verities for its drawing power. It must be a real novel." On April 13, he said, "The real story is that of the interplay of human elements with the estate matter and the debauching of the state government in the background. . . . The interest I have tried to maintain by the successive subplots . . . with an attempt to build up a set of characters in whose fate the reader will have some interest. . . . It is, I feel sure, the best thing I have done from the standpoint of straight novel-writing. I knew I had to succeed along lines of that sort, for I have not here the primitive stuff [which] was such a lure in *Vandemark's Folly*."

The Invisible Woman is essentially the story of Christina Thorkelson, who, "as a lawyer's stenographer and court reporter . . . becomes a sort of article of furniture . . . things are talked about before her, reduced to writing, and embodied in letters, so that she learns everything—much more than most well-informed men know, because she works with insiders" (to Howland, April 9, 1923). For most of the novel she is more a disembodied register for other characters than significant in herself, but she becomes important in the final chapters. Quick draws her too weakly to enable her to perform the function, say, of a Jamesian register. Without a strong narrative voice, the author commits what he later felt might be a mistake in his autobiography: "Following queer and interesting characters off into their manifestations, and running out odd and interesting happenings without much regard to their conventional values in the history of either my life or the society" (to Chambers, November 16, 1924). Without a central representative placed to control the work, Quick lost touch with the cluster of values centered upon his regional impulse. The traces of autobiographical mode in *The Invisible Woman* interfered with the central regional point of view he needed to focus his imagination. His efforts to create "a real novel" resulted in a sprawl of "queer and interesting characters."

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