

This book offers readers and browsers a treasure of arresting pictures, but much more as well. The images tell stories, reveal new truths, and illustrate important patterns in Illinois history.

CULLOM DAVIS is professor of history, Sangamon State University, and director of The Lincoln Legal Papers, in Springfield, Illinois. Among his recent writings is an interpretive essay on Illinois history in James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (1988).

American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago.

By Ross Miller. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Pp. ix, 287. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95.)

Like Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1956), the seminal effort in American Studies at identifying and tracing the myths generated out of the negotiation of American values and dreams with American place and experience, Ross Miller's *American Apocalypse* is an ambitious book. Though the topic is framed by narrower space and a briefer period of time—a single, if unique and unprecedented, city between the comprehensive conflagration of October, 1871, and the lesser one that destroyed the White City of the Columbian Exposition of 1894—articulating it requires the same sensitivity to what is in the “texts” and what lies between them. The destruction, rebuilding, and celebration of Chicago certainly offered a compelling basis of fact to which emotion, trope, and industry could attach themselves. The fire left 90,000 people homeless and 18,000 buildings destroyed where less than forty years before had been a frontier outpost. Rebuilding on those ashes produced in little more than two decades the modern skyscraper metropolis of Louis H. Sullivan, Daniel Burnham, and John W. Root. The White City marked this unprecedented newness not by acknowledging that authentic architectural uniqueness but by assembling an artificial and reactionary classicism, not by acknowledging the tensions of wealth and labor unrest then portending a new apocalypse but by invoking conventional tableaux of peace and abundance. Miller's survey of relevant materials is commensurate with the scope of the Chicago story. He draws on journalistic accounts of the fall and rise of the city, boosterism, minor novels and novelists as well as major ones (notably Robert Herrick and Henry B. Fuller), planning documents, the words and structures of the lesser and greater architects. Abundant illustration ties the story to the site.

But finally Chicago rather than Miller's argument is the source of coherence. Miller finds too many myths in the flames, and the binary terms in which he conceives them (primitive/modern, destruction/creation, business/art) threaten to reduce them to intellectual abstractions rather than enliven them into a cultural dynamic of image and fact. Too often his explication is without a text or an agent: “The city managed to insinuate itself into

a larger narrative, consciously exploiting its own tragedy as an archetype of the modern struggle against adversity" (p. 2). Though the chapters fashion a useful account of the *history* of Chicago literature and architecture, they also become disconnected set pieces of critical invention rather than convincing statements of discovery. In *American Apocalypse* Miller commits the mistake—too common in myth study—of participating in the creative process rather than convincingly describing it.

DAVID J. NORDLOH is professor of English and director of American Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington. He is also general editor of "A Selected Edition of W. D. Howells" and coeditor of the review annual *American Literary Scholarship*.

Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis. By Jeffrey S. Adler. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. vii, 274. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$42.50.)

In the highly mobile American society with its rapid residential turnover it is the people who do not yet live in your neighborhood who will determine its character ten years hence. Jeffrey S. Adler applies this same principle to his analysis of the shifting fortunes of antebellum St. Louis. The city's future, he argues, was determined less by the attitudes and initiative of its long-term residents than by the decisions of outsiders to migrate to, invest in, or do business in St. Louis. In particular he attributes the rapid growth of St. Louis in the late 1840s and early 1850s to its sudden popularity among New York and New England businessmen. Its mid-1850s slump and loss of primacy to Chicago he ascribes to the equally sudden withdrawal of that popularity.

Many students of urban rivalry in the nineteenth-century United States have looked within each city to find the causes of its rapid or slow growth. The best known analysis of antebellum St. Louis, published by Wyatt W. Belcher in 1947, did just that, blaming the city's relative decline on its lack of enterprise and its indifference to railroad building. Adler strongly disagrees, finding the explanation for the erratic career of St. Louis in external forces. Antebellum St. Louis faced serious obstacles to the mobilization of capital because of antibanking measures supported by rural Missourians. Indeed, the hostility of downstaters to the city's mercantile functions was a persistent problem from the 1820s to the 1850s. Capital-poor St. Louis therefore found itself dependent on fickle "Yankee" dollars to finance its mercantile sector. The crisis came when the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854 reopened the question of slavery in the territories. Rural Missourians, with their strong southern roots, supported the extension of slavery into Kansas. Antislavery Yankees such as New York editor William Cullen Bryant responded by attacking St. Louis mer-