

## *Our Family Dreams: The Fletchers' Adventures in Nineteenth-Century America*

By Daniel Blake Smith

(New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016. Pp. x, 275. Illustrations, notes, index. \$26.99.)

This good and important book will appeal to Indianans and others across the nation. Smith, a Texan, earned his doctorate in history at the University of Virginia and taught at the University of Kentucky before abandoning academia to become a freelance novelist, screenwriter, and producer based in St. Louis. In his powerful documentary films, as in his novels, he has explored major turning points in United States history. In *Our Family Dreams*, Smith has set out to explore the ways in which an ordinary family made the American dream work for it.

Smith chose the Jesse Fletcher family of Massachusetts and Vermont as the vehicle for his examination of the complexities of nineteenth-century life, as Americans scattered across the nation and eventually the world. This choice, for which he credited his historian wife, proved inspired. Her suggestion of a biography of a southern plantation (and slave) owner and community leader in the Lynchburg, Virginia, area, Elijah Fletcher (the sixth child of patriarch Jesse's fifteen), led to a much broader project when Smith discovered the "massive diary" of Elijah's younger brother, Calvin, a leading citizen of Indianapolis. This remarkable document, nearly 5,000 printed pages long and spanning almost fifty years, was published by the Indiana Historical Society in nine volumes in 1973 to 1982, and enabled

Smith to transform "a provocative individual story...into a family saga" (p. 255).

As absorbing as a well-plotted and skillfully written novel, *Our Family Dreams* follows the difficult lives of the Fletchers as they left their New England home, often with no resources beyond their resolve and willingness to work hard, adapt, and eke out a survival. Surprisingly, although raised in a strongly abolitionist family that valued education as the key to success in all walks of life, elder son Elijah gave up a planned teaching career to settle in Virginia, where he accepted and prospered in the culture of the South. His brother, Calvin, first taught and practiced law in Ohio, where he married a disadvantaged but moral former student, who became the mother of his eleven children. In 1821, the couple moved to newly established Indianapolis, where Calvin slowly developed into one of that city's most prominent citizens—lawyer, banker, land speculator, and ardent reformer, being strongly anti-slavery and equally strong regarding temperance and school reform.

Valuable insights abound in the book about travel hardships, family life, and the trials of parenthood—Calvin, try as he could, was never able, to his own satisfaction, to instill in his children the habits of life and values he desired for them. A stern

parent who governed by fear rather than love and compassion, he was nevertheless remarkably generous in their frequent times of need.

Indeed, the children of Elijah (four of six) and Calvin (all eleven) who reached adulthood embraced many occupations (farming, professorships, ministry and missionary work), traveled widely, and brought credit to themselves and their family. Ultimately Elijah's daughter, whom he named Indiana to honor his brother's choice of residence, was the one who most significantly embraced the family's belief in education. She converted Elijah's Virginia estate, Sweet Briar, into an elegant and distinctive college for women, known as Sweet Briar College, which still thrives.

Written with the skills of a talented novelist and the insights of a trained

historian, this book is an outstanding achievement. It could have been improved, for those interested in Indiana history, by more attention given to Calvin's associates in Indianapolis and with a deeper awareness of Indiana's military contributions in the 1860s, but it is an excellent and recommended way to fresh insights on Indiana and American history in the middle years of the nineteenth century.

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### *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* By Frank Felsenstein and James L. Connolly

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. Pp. xiii, 304. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$90.00; paper, \$28.95.)

In 2003, librarians at the Muncie Public Library discovered a cache of ledgers documenting the names and addresses of every person who joined the library between 1875 and 1904, the books acquired by the library from 1875 to early 1903, and ten years of circulation transactions beginning in November 1891. Seeking to make these rare records available to the

public, the library collaborated on a six-year project with the Ball State University Center for Middletown Studies and the Ball State Libraries to create an online database, *What Middletown Read*.

Authors Frank Felsenstein and James L. Connolly cite two goals for their similarly titled book: to "describe the evolving culture of print"