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Some Projects in Midwest Cultural History

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When young Lincoln Steffens entered the University of California as a student, he flung himself with energy and optimism into the pursuit of truth. But he soon discovered that not only was truth elusive and protean but knowledge itself was deceptive and insecure. The social sciences were only beginning to show some objective validity, the physical sciences constantly required revision and codification, the arts aspired nobly to a perfection which they never quite reached. To Steffens, eager for reliable and final answers, the situation was perplexing. "Nothing is done," he cried out in exasperation, "Everything in the world remains to be done or done over."¹

While the student of the cultural history of the Middle West is not precisely in Steffens' predicament, he too is constantly aware of uninvestigated areas of life, unsolved problems, unwritten biographies, and unpublished records. Despite a spate of articles, monographs, and books in the last fifty years, with the literary record constantly amplifying and ramifying, the picture is still considerably short of complete. Indeed much remains to be done, or in Steffens' words to be done over, before any kind of valid synthesis can be achieved.

It is neither courteous nor intelligent, of course, to overlook the solid accomplishments of the immediate past. The literary historian thinks at once of Ralph L. Rusk's monumental volumes entitled *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier*, and every student of the development of the Ohio country is grateful to R. Carlyle Buley for his comprehensive

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¹ *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931), 117, 126.

The Old Northwest. Both authors, unfortunately, saw fit to make 1840 their terminal date. An older writer, William H. Venable, produced a fascinating personal chronicle of the Cincinnati school in his *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley*, although modern readers find it uncritical and factually unreliable. Dorothy A. Dondore's *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America* is comprehensive and useful but its very inclusiveness blurs its focus. Harlan Hatcher and Walter Havighurst have fused political, economic, and social history in several books, and Philip D. Jordan's *National Road* illustrates admirably the impact of a great western turnpike on time, place, and manners. Of the many volumes devoted to the lake regions and river valleys of the Middle West none is more charming than James M. Phalen's *Sinnissippi*, the story of the Rock River of Wisconsin and Illinois.

Biographies, of course, are numerous and varied. Without pausing to enumerate the studies of soldiers, clergymen, and politicians, one might observe that biographical studies have been written about such literary figures as Timothy Flint, James Hall, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Edward Eggleston, Finley Peter Dunne, Eugene Field, James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade, Theodore Dreiser, and William Allen White. Excellent bibliographies of such significant midwest authors as Ade and Riley have been compiled. The documents of particular cultural centers like New Harmony and Kaskaskia have been made available. Special monographs on the theatrical history of Davenport and St. Louis have been published, and critical studies of the work of such painters as George Caleb Bingham and John Steuart Curry have been written. Above all, the cultural historian owes a conspicuous debt to the historical societies of the various midwest states and to the hospitable policy of the editors of the quarterlies sponsored by these societies. For these journals have not held to a narrow conception of what history is but have published articles ranging in theme from publishing, education, and domestic life to accounts of literary and debating societies and chronicles of circuses and showboats.

But one remembers the bold assertions of Hamlin Garland in 1894. In a neglected little volume entitled *Crumbling Idols* he sought to establish his creed of veritism; he argued sincerely and persuasively for local color and for genuine use of the materials which an author knew best even though they

might include alleys and backyards. But even more to the point, Garland observed that midwest writers and artists in general were ignoring the possibilities of the life around them. Themes were crying out for treatment, he asserted, and he enumerated a few: the Mississippi River, the life of the Great Lakes region, the areas dominated by segments of foreign population, the epic of lumbering, the growth and impact of the railroads, the rise of towns and cities in his native Middle West. It is true that in this inventory Garland was thinking largely of creative activity, of poets and novelists who would employ such materials in great literature, of sculptors and painters who would mold durable works of art. But unfortunately neither artists nor scholars have taken the challenge seriously enough to provide the necessary answers. Although more than half a century has passed since *Crumbling Idols* appeared, many of Garland's themes remain untouched.

Certainly the possibilities are enormous. The recent death of Sinclair Lewis reminds us that no one has written a substantial biography of the first American man of letters to win the Nobel Prize for literature. It is inconceivable that Lewis will not eventually inspire a flood of reminiscent and biographical volumes, but the point is that so far they are all in the future. Almost equally paradoxical is the neglect of Hamlin Garland. Admittedly not a major figure in literature, Garland nevertheless occupies a secure place in the history of American realism and certainly his services were important enough to justify a serious study of his work. There is no adequate biography of Sherwood Anderson, despite the thousands of letters to and from Anderson that have found a haven in the Newberry Library; and there is no full-length study of Vachel Lindsay to compensate for some of the distortions inherent in the biography written by Edgar Lee Masters. Masters himself has had no biographical attention at all. Other once prominent writers of the Middle West who have so far eluded competent biographers are Joseph Kirkland, Booth Tarkington, Robert Herrick, Herbert Quick, Floyd Dell, John G. Neihardt, and Willa Cather.

To go back a little further, some earlier midwest authors have dropped into such complete obscurity that their personal existence seems almost mythical. Caleb Atwater, the Ohio historian and educator, has never attracted a biographer, nor has William D. Gallagher, the Cincinnati journalist who edited

the *Hesperian* and in 1841 published the first anthology of midwest poetry. Such early literary figures of the Ohio Valley as Julia Dumont, Otway Curry, John James Piatt, Emerson Bennett, and Alice Cary have never been honored by substantial monographs. William Morton Payne, once the distinguished editor of the *Chicago Dial*, has so completely lost his identity that the recent *Literary History of the United States* confuses him with Will Payne, the Chicago novelist; and Francis Fisher Browne, founder and proprietor of the *Dial*, is not even listed in the index of the bibliographical volume of that work. There is no study of William T. Coggeshall, editor, novelist, and state librarian of Ohio. Maurice Thompson, author of that little gem of early realism, *Hoosier Mosaics*, as well as of the more famous *Alice of Old Vincennes*, has been by-passed by biographers, as has the romantic historical novelist Mary Hartwell Catherwood. Alice French, once widely known under the pseudonym of "Octave Thanet," seems quite forgotten. There was no more fascinating personality in American literary journalism than William Marion Reedy of St. Louis, but no biography has been written about the famous editor of the *Mirror*.² Moreover, even those biographies that have appeared have seldom provided satisfactory treatments of all aspects of their subjects. There is room for a study of Eggleston's literary evolution, for an analysis of William Allen White as a writer, for a discussion of the peculiar prairie asceticism of Edgar W. Howe.³

Sometimes a whole literary period has been neglected to such an extent that the cultural historian faces an almost insuperable obstacle. The Cincinnati of the 1830's provides one

² There is, of course, a *periodical* literature of substantial volume about some of these figures. About Reedy, for example see the following: Edgar Lee Masters, "Literary Boss of the Middle West," *American Mercury* (New York, 1924), XXXIV (1935), 450-455; John T. Flanagan, "Reedy of the *Mirror*," *Missouri Historical Review* (Columbia, 1906-), XLIII (1949), 128-144.

³ These comments have been limited to book-length publications and to published works. Doctoral dissertations on some of the authors mentioned remain unpublished in various places: on Edgar Lee Masters (University of Illinois), on Mary Hartwell Catherwood (Ohio State University), on Joseph Kirkland (Indiana University), on Sherwood Anderson (Ohio State University and University of Chicago), on Vachel Lindsay (University of Illinois), on Robert Herrick (University of Chicago), on Willa Cather (University of Iowa), and on Hamlin Garland (Ohio State University). One might add that two books on Anderson appeared in the spring of 1951, neither of which is in any sense a complete biography. See Irving Howe, *Sherwood Anderson* (New York, 1951), and James Schevill, *Sherwood Anderson, His Life and Work* (Denver, 1951).

example. Here prospered for some years the Semi-Colon Club, which convened at the home of Daniel Drake or Samuel E. Foote and which was dominated intellectually by Drake and James Hall. Among its members were Benjamin Drake, E. D. Mansfield, Caroline Hentz, Calvin B. Stowe, and, in later years the most illustrious of the group, the unmarried daughter of Lyman Beecher. Except for Mrs. Stowe these figures excite little attention today. A similar illustration is provided by the St. Louis of the pre-Civil War period, when Matthew Field and Joseph Field, Sol Smith, John S. Robb, and Charles Keemle dominated literary journalism and produced the lively journal known as the *Reveille*. Biographical data about Robb are obscure and confusing, and no biography exists of either of the Field brothers: Matthew, who under the pseudonym of "Phazma" wrote graceful light verse; and Joseph, who used such *noms de plumes* as "Straws" and "Everpoint" and created in *The Drama in Pokerville* an unforgettable bit of western portraiture. In the St. Louis of the post-Civil War period, the metropolis which was convinced by the census of 1880 that it never was to be the future great city of the world, fewer literary lights existed but studies of Alexander DeMenil and Denton J. Snider would be profitable. And certainly the once widely read historical novelist, Winston Churchill, author of *The Crossing* and *The Crisis*, needs examination.

But turn from writers themselves to writing and publishing. If great literature seldom emanates from a literary society or club, it is true that such organizations often have a lasting effect on authorship and for that reason alone merit study. The Western Association of Writers, which convened for a number of years in Indianapolis or at Lake Winona near Warsaw, Indiana, attracted such celebrities as James Whitcomb Riley, Maurice Thompson, and Opie Read, yet its history is inaccessible and incomplete. Frederick Gookin has written the story of the Chicago Literary Club but has provided little interpretation of the significance of that interesting and still active organization. The notorious Whitechapel Club of Chicago claimed all the celebrated newspapermen of the day as its members and sponsored many famous meetings, but its story has been only incompletely revealed in the autobiographies of the journalists who once belonged to it. Such organizations as the Caxton Club, with its bibliophilic traditions, and the Cliff Dwellers, promoted by Hamlin Garland and borrowing a name

from Henry Fuller's novel, have also played an important but little discussed role in the cultural history of the Middle West.

Publishing houses themselves have only recently become the subject of investigation, and certainly Sidney Kramer's admirable history of the firm of Stone & Kimball is a step in the right direction. But similar studies are needed of the beginnings of the McClurg firm, of Donnelley's Lakeside Press, of the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis, of various Cincinnati firms such as U. P. James and W. B. Smith & Company. The publishing history of such cities as St. Louis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Detroit, especially along belletristic lines, is virtually a closed book.

Moreover, the careers of the important literary magazines of the Middle West have been almost consistently ignored. One thinks of Timothy Flint's *Western Monthly Review*, of James Hall's *Western Monthly Magazine*, of the Gallagher-Curry *Hesperian*, of Coggeshall's *Genius of the West*. Francis Fisher Browne's *Lakeside Monthly*, published just before and after the Chicago Fire of 1871, deserves special consideration, as does his later *Dial*, for years the most reliable and most admired book-review periodical produced in the United States.⁴ No full-length study has ever been made of the Minneapolis *Bellman*, of the Chicago *Chap-Book*, of Reedy's St. Louis *Mirror*, of Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*, of the aptly titled "modern sardonic journal" edited by Ben Hecht, the Chicago *Literary Times*. Equally neglected are John T. Frederick's *Midland*, published at Iowa City and elsewhere, Lowry Wimberly's *Prairie Schooner*, published at Lincoln, and Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, the oldest and best of American magazines devoted to the publication and criticism of serious verse.⁵ This list could easily be augmented, but these examples will have to suffice.

But there are other literary or sub-literary forms which need to be recorded and analyzed. George Lyman Kittredge has revealed the significance of a single almanac for New

⁴ Fredric J. Mosher has made an intensive study of the *Dial* from 1880 to 1892 in an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Illinois).

⁵ Some literary magazines have been discussed in magazine articles: Lois T. Hartley, "The Midland," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* (Iowa City, 1903-), XLVII (1949), 325-344; Luella M. Wright, "The Midland Monthly," in *ibid.*, XLV (1947), 3-61; John T. Flanagan, "Early Literary Periodicals in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* (St. Paul, 1915-), XXVI (1945), 293-311. The best account of *Poetry* remains Harriet Monroe's autobiography, *A Poet's Life* (New York, 1938).

England, but no one has ever examined the almanacs of the Middle West in order to explain their popularity and to discuss them as reflections of popular taste. Here the uniformity and conventionality of the type should not blind the student to regional variations. Midwest almanacs, unfortunately, are not easily studied as the fancier of the Davy Crockett comic almanacs or the Commodore Rollingpin almanacs of John Henton Carter has ample occasion to know. But even if no midwest library is as rich in this sort of material as the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, it should be possible with reasonable diligence to assemble enough examples.

There is similar need to investigate the whole field of gazetteers, guidebooks, and traveler's aids which poured from the press before the Civil War and which reveal the prospective immigrants' anxiety about routes, clothes, expenses, equipment, food prices, and land purchasing. Some of these volumes had an amazing longevity. John Kilbourn's *Ohio Gazetteer* went through nine editions in fifteen years, while the various books of John Mason Peck about the Illinois country had a wide circulation and still retain value as sources for the history of the period. From a literary point of view, the most interesting of these guidebooks are those which became on occasion both subjective and dramatic. Peck was not averse to interpolating his own views on temperance and slavery,⁶ while Alphonso Wetmore appended several interesting realistic sketches to the usual summary of statistical information in his *Gazetteer of the State of Missouri*, published in 1837. As the territories filled with settlers and achieved statehood, there was less need for such tabloid information, but gazetteers continued to appear for the trans-Mississippi states until well past the Civil War. They reveal intimate and curious glimpses of immigrant life despite the fact that they were commonly written in the style and manner of the promoter.

One might indeed hazard the statement that the entire historiography of the Middle West has never been examined for its own sake. Michael Kraus in his study of the writing of American history completely ignores the early midwest historians although he pays ample attention to the Middle West in history and devotes considerable space to such writers as Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, and Reuben

⁶ See such volumes as *A Gazetteer of Illinois* (Jacksonville, 1834), and *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (Boston, 1836).

Gold Thwaites.⁷ The names of such pioneers in the field as John W. Monette, James Hall, Caleb Atwater, John B. Dillon, Henry Howe, Thomas Ford, John Reynolds, Increase Allen Lapham, and Edward Neill are becoming increasingly obscure, and certainly few scholars have made any attempt to examine their historical work critically. Yet their merits have not disappeared merely because in general their books have been supplanted. Monette's *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi* is still the best early study of the subject, and James Hall's account of the first steamboats on the Ohio River and his description of the prairies as they were in the days of the first whites are both valuable and interesting. Nor should the casual reader of history neglect Henry Howe's anecdotes of Ohio life or John Reynolds' vividly subjective impressions of early experiences in Illinois.⁸ Many of the nineteenth century historians of the Middle West were solid and substantial writers; they still deserve attention.

When one turns to the field of lyceum lecturing and popular entertainment, the picture is not materially different. What has been done here is scattered and relatively slight; published studies have generally appeared as articles in historical quarterlies. The itineraries of distinguished eastern lecturers have been traced by students eager to salvage every biographical detail about Emerson, Alcott, Melville, Bayard Taylor, Holmes, and Greeley. But the total view is still hazy and incomplete. The cultural historian needs to know the impact of the lyceum system upon the smaller communities, the number and kind of lectures given, their popular reception, the fees paid, the newspaper reports, the general influence upon the local scene. Before such information can be distilled and clearly presented, newspaper files in many a small town will have to be ransacked.

Theatrical history is somewhat richer and has yielded good results to several students, but even here much remains to be done.⁹ For in these days of motion pictures, radio, and

⁷ The names of Hall, Flint, Monette, Atwater, and Ford, not to mention many others, do not even appear in the index of Kraus's book, *A History of American History* (New York, 1937).

⁸ Josephine Louise Harper has written a study of John Reynolds (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois); Huntley Dupre has published in *Edward Duffield Neill* (St. Paul, 1949), a short study of the pioneer Minnesota historian.

⁹ A number of substantial doctoral dissertations on the theatrical history of the Middle West have been written at the University of Chicago.

television it is easy to forget that the visiting theatrical star and the traveling troupe of thespians were an integral part of midwest life throughout much of the nineteenth century. River towns especially benefited from such visits and were far more likely to see Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, William Macready, and Joseph Jefferson in person than their twentieth century counterparts are likely to see John Gielgud or Maurice Evans. The programs were rich and substantial with the plays of Shakespeare often providing the staple offerings but with light comedies, pantomimes, and farces frequently filling out an evening's entertainment. Such towns as Peoria, Quincy, Lafayette, Bloomington, Vincennes, Keokuk, Evansville, and Springfield would probably never see a Theater Guild production today; but their nineteenth century theatrical history is a profitable and fascinating subject to explore.

Moreover, students attracted by such a research field have tended to emphasize the history of the stage rather than the history of the drama. It is true that dramatic composition has never flourished in the Middle West like other literary forms, largely because of the lack of the necessary mediums of production, but from Augustus Thomas's *In Mizzoura* and *The Copperhead* to George Ade's *The County Chairman* and Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* regional drama has been written. Among other interesting midwest dramatists one might list Booth Tarkington, Zoe Akins, E. P. Conkle, and Susan Glasspell. Their work needs evaluation.

From the theater it is an easy transition to the showboat and its impact upon the life of the small community. Edna Ferber made good imaginative use of the subject and the Broadway stage seized upon the theatrical possibilities of her novel, but little has been printed about the historical showboats, the plays they produced, the physical difficulties of production, the actors presented, and the audiences catered to and pleased.¹⁰ Indeed for a really vivid picture of certain aspects of showboat spectacles and life one must turn to fiction, to the

See several recent articles by Harold E. Briggs and Ernestine Briggs, "The Early Theater on the Northern Plains," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914-), XXXVII (1950-1951), 231-264; "The Early Theatre in Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, 1908-), XXXIX (1946), 165-178; "The Early Theatre in the Upper Mississippi Valley," *Mid-America* (Chicago, 1918-), XXXII (1950), 89-103.

¹⁰ Joseph S. Schick presents a good deal of information in a recent article, "Early Showboat and Circus in the Upper Valley," *Mid-America*, XXXII, 211-225.

king-and-duke scenes in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and to the less well known but more fully detailed chapters in Charles D. Stewart's *Partners of Providence*. Equally profitable would be a study of the history of the circus in the Middle West, not a cultural manifestation of high importance perhaps but an essential part of the American scene. Shabby showmen accompanying moth-eaten animals in cages and grandiosely advertised traveling menageries appeared relatively early in the Ohio Valley and further west; the considerable curiosity they excited among the youth of both urban and rural areas is vividly apparent in the ninth chapter of William Dean Howells's *A Boy's Town*. Clearly the barker's spiel and the billboard poster have been familiar longer than most of us realize today.

Finally, one must echo the remark of Stanley Pargellis that the cultural and social history of the midwest city, even the cultural and social history of Chicago, remains to be written.¹¹ Books do exist, of course, books about St. Louis and Cleveland and Milwaukee, old-fashioned books generally with the emphasis upon economic and political development and with ample attention paid to distinguished citizens—often with formal portraits and comfortably eulogistic biographies. But most of these volumes are booster books or are examples of luxury publishing which reveal little critical analysis and small understanding of the problems involved. Sociological studies of the bigger midwest cities lag far behind (although of course Muncie can boast of its *Middletown*), and adequate cultural studies simply do not exist. Despite the many other subjects for investigation enumerated above, one is tempted to agree with the words of Pargellis: "Good books about cities are the great unwritten things in the Midwest."¹²

But since this article makes no pretense to being exhaustive it is useless to illustrate further. The Middle West is not only a large land mass with tremendous potentiality in industry, food production, civic improvement, and artistic creation; it is also a region with a rich, varied, and significant cultural history. Before any kind of adequate synthesis can be made, before the cultural historian can reach any final judgment, a multitude of paths must be explored.

¹¹ Stanley Pargellis, "A Great City in Need of a Biographer," *Chicago Sun Book Week*, May 4, 1947, p. 15.

¹² *Ibid.*