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## Review of The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture.

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*The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture.* By James R. Shortridge. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 201 pp. \$25.00.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in historical regions in the United States. Regionalism had fallen on hard times, at least among historians, after the publication

of Merrill Jensen's book of essays, *Regionalism in America*, in 1951. Centers, histories, and encyclopedias of the South, the West, the Pacific Northwest, and the Great Plains, have developed during the last decade or so, but America's heartland, the Middle West, has come in for very little scrutiny. James R. Shortridge, a cultural geographer at the University of Kansas, has produced a delightful and important study of the concept and meaning of the Middle West in American culture. Professor Shortridge counts himself as among a small group of humanistic geographers, and this is "an unconventional geography" in that it examines the "emotion-laden and particularistic term 'place,'" as opposed to the traditional concern of "scientific" geographers with space. The work deals with perceptions of the Middle West and its meaning in fiction and popular culture. He argues that the Middle West stands as symbol for the pastoral aspect of American culture, in contrast to the complex and predominant urban reality of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In fact, midwestern culture suffers from a vagueness and ambiguity of identity, largely because, according to Shortridge, there is no historical core for midwestern culture, such as Puritanism for New England, slavery and the Civil War experience for the South, and the cattle industry for the southwestern plains. The Middle West has always been 'middle'—in between. In fact, the term first referred to Kansas and Nebraska, the site of a stable middle-of-the-West in the 1880s—that is, midway between the Southwest, Texas and the Oklahoma Indian Territory, and the Northwest, the Dakotas and Minnesota. The term quickly expanded to include twelve states by 1902 because of the growing recognition of the far Northwest or Pacific Northwest. Just before World War I the Middle West reached its pinnacle of self-identification and assurance as a center of the pastoral traits of morality and egalitarian independence as opposed to the Far West which was still brash and young and the East which was old and stodgy. The Middle West reached the height of its young maturity full of energy and ideals, and the heartland became the vital core. Although between

1900 and the 1920s there was, among writers and journalists, an attempt to create a hybrid harmony of agricultural and industrial images, such as the descriptions of Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago that praised technology, energy and progress, and the automobile, above all, which became the symbol of virile American enterprise, yet this never altered the pastoral midwestern image. In fact, Shortridge argues, the Midwest is a prime example of our need to regionalize national myths in order to avoid confrontation with contradictions. After 1920 popular literature equates the Middle West with unchanging pastoral values and tradition. Interestingly enough, Shortridge finds that perceptions of the physical boundaries of the Midwest have been shifting since the 1950s, to move westward to include the plains states and to the exclusion of Ohio and parts of Indiana, Michigan, and parts of Illinois. Shortridge does not entirely neglect the paraphernalia of the geographer, for he uses cognitive maps to illustrate these shifting perceptions of the location of the Midwest.

This book is a well-argued analysis of a variety of sources in the tradition of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*. While Shortridge does not attempt to lay to rest the question of the objective existence of a midwestern culture or examine the nature of that culture and its origins, his work will nevertheless stimulate a good deal of debate and further research.

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