

## Writing Illinois: the Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago

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ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Weber, Ronald. "Writing Illinois: the Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago." *The Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994), 181-183.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9809>

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Nebraska ventured far and wide across the western half of Iowa even though Greene makes hardly a mention of their success.

Sometimes Greene seems to overrate the Scandinavian role in making the polka popular. Many bands readily adapted to their audiences. Skipper Berg, for example, styled his group the Viking Accordion Band even though his music was more often German and Bohemian. Whoopee John Wilfahrt, on the other hand, though clad in Bavarian duds, always managed to offer in addition to German medleys Norwegian, Swedish, or Finnish numbers when he was lucky enough to be booked into those ethnic locales. In fact, Wilfahrt's success came largely from promotion by recording companies and his remarkable combining of a German-American style with a rural and "blue-collar" attraction to his particular brand of entertainment.

Greene is expansive about other ethnic musicians as well, including especially Italian and Jewish (Yiddish) groups, who succeeded in comic skits as well as in musical settings in the large cities on both coasts. His superb index lets readers interested in only individual items enjoy this "encyclopedia" for specific information, for even the footnotes are indexed. An annotated bibliography guides the novice. If there is a deficiency—wholly excusable because of Greene's already distracting plethora of inclusions under the heading "ethnic music"—it is his lack of information about the American dance hall. Along with the recording studios and the radio shows that Greene credits, the "hand-in-glove" building of dance halls offered that critical advance from summer "empty hayloft" barn dances to professional entertainment centers, without which polka music would not have triumphed.

*Writing Illinois: The Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago*, by James Hurt. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992. vii, 154 pp. Bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RONALD WEBER, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

"The idea of making something out of nothing," James Hurt writes, is the "exemplary Illinois gesture" (5). By this he means that Illinois writers have confronted a literary world decidedly thin as material—or, to put a better face on it, one strikingly new. In either case the creative life in the Land of Lincoln has been an uneasy one, leading to a good deal of cultural uncertainty on the part of writers—"the tendency to give with one hand and take away with the other when we describe our home country" (6).

What is true of Illinois seems true of the Midwest as a whole. But Hurt is not given to generalizations about a region that strikes him as "culturally pluralistic"; he resists flattening the Midwest into an "undifferentiated mass" (2). He is wary, in fact, of any overarching ideas, preferring to keep the focus of this slender volume on Illinois alone—and, more exactly, on three central concerns of its literature: the prairie, the memory of Lincoln, and the overwhelming presence of Chicago.

Within each area Hurt isolates particular works for close attention. In the opening section William Cullen Bryant's 1833 poem "The Prairies" is given extended analysis, as is John Regan's *Emigrant's Guide to the Western States of America* (1846) and Francis Grierson's Sangamon sketches in *The Valley of Shadows* (1909). Hurt makes a brief leap to a contemporary novel, Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988) with its fine description of the Illinois prairie as "minimalist architecture of the straight row, bare box, and spare headland" (46). But Powers receives only a mention. Hurt's approach is to dip into prairie writing rather than try for anything close to a comprehensive account.

The Lincoln section is equally selective but more satisfying, in part because the topic is dauntingly rich and clearly vital in Illinois writing. Hurt's account, examining Lincoln in the hands of William H. Herndon, Jane Addams, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg, is consistently interesting and revealing. Unfortunately, he also tries to lend his readings deeper meaning by drawing on critical jargon that offends eye and ear. Thus Hayden White's "emplotment" makes the first of several appearances (56), and he quotes Cary Nelson's dubious notion that "when literature is provisionally contextualized . . . some of the more well-known failures in modern poetry become as interesting as the established successes" (69) to lend importance (rather halfheartedly, as it turns out) to the triad of Illinois poets: Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg. But for the most part Hurt steers clear of numbing critical language. His method is to read closely and set forth his findings in ordinary English.

In the final section Hurt avoids "Canonical Chicago" (98) as it has been shaped by numerous commentators on the city's literature in favor of "Alternative Chicagos" (106). Thus Henry Blake Fuller, Floyd Dell, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson give way in his pages to Nelson Algren's *Chicago: City on the Make* (1951), Studs Terkel's *Chicago* (1986), and a brief tour of contemporary work by Cyrus Colter, Maxine Chernoff, Stuart Dybek, and Paul Hoover. Finally, however, the section is given over to an extended account of the Chicago fiction of Saul Bellow, a figure hardly lacking in mainline critical assessment.

In the final paragraphs Hurt returns to his view of the ambivalence at the heart of Illinois writing—the uncertainty about “what sort of life a life in prairie land should be” (143). This reader would have preferred more attention to such broad concerns—and a more ambitious volume than that provided, as Hurt acknowledges, “by the handful of texts we have looked at” (142). Nonetheless, the ongoing analysis of midwestern literature and culture needs all the help it can get, and this narrowly aimed book is a welcome addition to the enterprise.

*Seventy-Five Years of Service: Cooperative Extension in Iowa*, by Dorothy Schwieder. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993. xiv, 270 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARGARET BEATTIE BOGUE, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

In *Seventy-Five Years of Service* Dorothy Schwieder traces the evolution of the Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service from its formal creation under the provisions of the Smith-Lever Cooperative Extension Act in 1914 through the 1980s. Employing almost three dozen oral interviews, manuscripts in the special collections of the Iowa State University Library, newspapers, printed state and federal documents, and a wide range of secondary works, Schwieder examines a significant segment of rural economic and social history: the ways informal education offered by the state agricultural colleges influenced farm people's lives.

The Smith-Lever Act was a logical continuation of federal support for agriculture begun early in the nation's history, demonstrated repeatedly in land policy, in technical assistance offered farmers, and in its encouragement of agricultural education through the Morrill and Hatch Acts. Smith-Lever became law in 1914 as a central part of the progressive package to improve farm life, an important tool that helped to implement the objectives of Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. Then American agriculture flourished, and most people still lived in rural areas. The Smith-Lever concept of taking education directly to farm people made good political and economic sense, designed as it was to keep rural life healthy by encouraging federal-state cooperative programs, using a system of county agents, teaching by demonstration, and emphasizing club activities for youth and domestic science for farm women.

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