

The Flatness and Other Landscapes

John Price

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2001 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Price, John. "The Flatness and Other Landscapes." *The Annals of Iowa* 60 (2001), 302-304.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol60/iss3/26>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

subject. On one hand, it treats an important subject, the history of human efforts to manage the upper Mississippi River, through a perspective that is important and perhaps underrepresented in public debates. On the other hand, the book's lack of analytical depth, poor contextual development, and special pleading decrease the overall value of its conclusions.

Bill Klingner's professional career as a civil engineer began in 1935, coincident with the construction of the lock and dam system that created a permanent nine-foot shipping channel on the upper Mississippi. Klingner's career in private engineering practice concentrated on the engineering and land use problems associated with systems of flood control levees that line much of the river in southern Illinois and Missouri. His insights on the perceived necessity to control the Mississippi's waters and the complexities of doing so are important; not only does he offer first-person, detailed views on what went into various construction projects, but his anecdotes also recapture some of the feelings and drama of struggling with this mighty waterway.

That said, there are substantial problems with this book, which limit its overall importance for scholars and serious students of the river. Petterchak, listed on the book's cover as "a researcher and writer of biographies and business histories," fills much of the text with long quotations from Klingner, as he tells stories, offers observations, and presents his opinions on the state of the upper Mississippi. Unfortunately, she did very little other research that would provide the analytical depth or complicated contextualization that the subject really warrants. The book speaks deliberately to the current controversy over public management of the upper Mississippi, but does not show a depth of knowledge on that subject sufficient to be fully respected. The issues, both historical and ecological, social and economic, are far more complex than this book acknowledges.

The Flatness and Other Landscapes, by Michael Martone. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000. xii, 171 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer John Price is assistant professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. His research focuses on literary views of the prairies.

Michael Martone is well known among readers of midwestern literature for his essays, stories, and edited anthologies. This collection, which won the prestigious Associated Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction, brings together some of his best work. Together, these essays are a mix of subjects and styles, ranging from the history of windmills to a more personal exploration of the history of his

hometown, Fort Wayne, Indiana. His preoccupation, however, is always with the Midwest—defining its boundaries, telling its stories, interpreting its cultural symbols, unearthing its local histories, as well as exploring its precarious present and future.

The collection begins with the title essay, "The Flatness," in which Martone works against the popular assumption that the Midwest is "flat." By now this is a clichéd observation, but it does provide impetus for Martone's close-up exploration of midwestern culture and history. It also sets the tone for the rest of the collection, which is celebratory but also regretful, sometimes combative, in its reflections on a region in "ruins," in love with a romantic version of its past while, at the same time, struggling with hard economic and social realities in the present. Iowa figures prominently in this regard, providing the location for half of the 14 essays. In "Pulling Things Back Down to Earth," for instance, Martone recounts time he spent on an Iowa hog farm, listening to the family's history on that land and mourning how that history, in particular the myth of independence, has aggravated their current financial and emotional struggle.

Martone's geographic sweep is broad, however, as he works to prove that all places in the Midwest contain significant "layers" of story. In "Flyover," Martone begins by claiming that "no one really knows where or what the Midwest is" (106), then proceeds to explore under various headings—The Great Lakes, The Great Plains, The Great River (the Mississippi)—local anecdotes and histories that, together, create a mosaic portrait of the region. As he does throughout the collection, Martone relates some fascinating historical details, juxtaposing the big ("The landing craft for D-Day were built in Evansville, Indiana") with the small ("Circleville, Ohio, is known for its pumpkins"). Ultimately, though, Martone defines the Midwest as a place where people must "daily flex the muscle of imagination, to see the potential in their surroundings, to cast themselves in an artistic and epic drama" (126). This is one of the unifying themes of the book: Martone's fascination with the "abstract" Midwest, the collection of metaphors and myths by which people have defined this region and their relationship to it.

Martone's exploration of regional metaphor and myth is at once the greatest strength and greatest weakness of this collection. At times, he offers moving observations of how local metaphors, particularly those representing an ideal past, work to both uplift and blind those who hold them dear. At other times, such as his portrait of Riverside, Iowa's attempt to establish itself as the future birthplace of *Star Trek's* Captain James T. Kirk, his treatment appears superficial and a bit con-

descending. Also missing is any significant engagement with natural history, which would have been particularly appropriate in the final essay, "Correctionville, Iowa," a reflection on the impact of the Jeffersonian grid. Still, this is a strong book overall, and should be part of any collection of midwestern literature and history.

History Just Ahead: A Guide to Wisconsin's Historical Markers, edited by Sarah Davis McBride. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1999; distributed by University of Wisconsin Press. xiii, 286 pp. Maps, illustrations, index. \$12.95 paper.

Reviewer Harold E. Gulley is associate professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. His research interests include historical geography and cartography, cultural landscapes, and transportation.

This guidebook provides texts, locations, and erection dates for 412 Wisconsin roadside markers. A brief introduction outlines the marker program's historical context. Any marker program is challenged to describe present or past landscape features concisely and accurately for the public. Begun in 1944 and reinvigorated in 1994, Wisconsin's program has relied on input and funding from members of the public to identify cultural and natural features considered sufficiently noteworthy to attract tourists' attention. The results of Wisconsin's marker program are evident across the state's landscape. Native American culture is noted at Silver Mound, French exploration at Prairie du Chien, Yankee immigration at Cooksville, and Swedish settlement at New Genoa. Highlighted natural features include drumlins, the Northwest Portal and its abundant wildlife, Lower Narrows, and Wisconsin Dells. Agriculture and industry are represented by cranberry growing and paper making. Popular culture appears in such forms as sites associated with the ice cream sundae, four-wheel drive, American Springer Spaniel, and Green Bay Packers. Marker program officials now encourage nomination of neglected topics: the history of African Americans (Pleasant Ridge) and women (Ada James), ethnic diversity (Bay View), ordinary people (Alexander Noble), and routes (Western Escape).

Audiences for this book include travelers, both active and arm-chair, and students and scholars of Wisconsin history, both natural and cultural, and of popular history and culture. The selectivity evident in topics commemorated bears witness to the culture and values of Wisconsin residents. Inclusion of dates of erection for the markers is especially helpful to researchers desiring to examine historical and cultural contexts.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.