

An Iowa Tragedy: the Fall of Old Des Moines U

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Book Reviews

An Iowa Tragedy: The Fall of Old Des Moines U., by David Wiggins. Mount Horeb, WI: Historical-Midwest Books, 1988. iv, 132 pp. Illustrations, bibliographical essay, index. \$18.50 cloth, \$8.95 paper.

Pathos and nostalgia triumph over conventional history in this entertaining (albeit frustrating) book. Des Moines University was a Baptist institution that never attracted more than a few hundred students at any one time. It nonetheless possesses an interesting history, suggestive of many midwestern colleges' triumphs and trials between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Wiggins tells its story well when he manages to avoid personal recollections or tangential anecdotes.

Wiggins correctly notes that in the nineteenth-century Midwest, "transplanted New Englanders were particularly determined to promote higher education" (16). In the Des Moines case, John A. Nash (actually a New York native) arrived in the 1850s and was a struggling pastor before other Baptist ministers formed the college and appointed Nash principal. His institution attracted students quickly but remained in financial straits for years, mostly due to competition from Central College, another Baptist school. In the 1890s, after Nash died, the Des Moines college briefly served as a satellite of William R. Harper's University of Chicago. Highland Park Normal College, a teacher-training institution that sporadically enjoyed considerable success, merged with the Baptist school in 1918 to form Des Moines University. The ensuing decade witnessed DMU's brief golden age, which flamed out in a rush of troubles between 1927 and 1929.

The controversy began when the Baptist Bible Union, a fundamentalist group with particular strength in Canada, gained control of DMU and installed Thomas T. Shields of Toronto as president. Determined to uproot what he perceived as modernist proclivities at the college, Shields conducted a wholesale purge of faculty members. His alleged indiscretions with a female aide increased bitterness over the firings and, in May 1929, inspired a student riot that effectively closed DMU forever.

While recounting these events intelligently, Wiggins so often falls into amateurish expressions and patronizing (sometimes sexist) efforts at cleverness that many important issues never gain clear treatment. *An Iowa Tragedy* contains little information on student life at DMU, although this could arise from limitations in available sources. The book would benefit from a chronological table to trace the college's name changes and administrative history.

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