

Kinship With the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894-1942

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1997 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Kinship With the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894-1942." *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1997), 298-301.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10979>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Framed by Elwyn B. Robinson's and D. Jerome Tweton's essays on the state's past and future, respectively, virtually all of the articles fit into Robinson's six themes of North Dakota history: remoteness, dependence, radicalism, economic disadvantage, periodic overdevelopment, and adjustment to climate and geography. The interests and the backgrounds of the authors are wide-ranging: professional archeologists wrote articles on Native Americans, while another selection is a memoir by a pathbreaking photojournalist of the earliest days of television in North Dakota. In between are articles on Missouri River steamboating and small-town lynching, immigrant hardships and president-to-be Theodore Roosevelt, Native Americans at home and at far-off boarding schools, a French entrepreneur and the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, and farm radicals and labor organizers. Several offer excerpts from primary sources, including three produced by women: a diary from Fort Berthold in the 1860s, letters from a hard-pressed farm wife just after World War I, and the memoir of a rural schoolteacher in the 1920s. Most of the entries have at least some relevance to the region as well as the state, particularly John Hudson's revisionist look at frontier housing; Thomas D. Isern's "Custom Combining in North Dakota," which necessarily includes information on the movements of itinerant harvesters throughout the country's midsection; and William C. Pratt's examination of the tensions over the New Deal and Communism within the national and regional Farmers Union in the years after the Second World War. Experts may quibble with interpretations and methodologies; general readers may find a handful of articles to be too specialized; and some critics may find the writing quality a little uneven and the coverage of some issues too sparse; but the volume generally succeeds in providing a cross-section of the historiography of North Dakota.

Elwyn B. Robinson wrote in the late 1950s that "to a considerable extent, the history of the state is the history of hard times" (8). Those hard times, as well as a few good times, are presented effectively, sympathetically, and honestly in this fine collection of essays.

Kinship with the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894-1942, by E. Bradford Burns. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. xii, 195 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS K. DEAN, MOORHEAD STATE UNIVERSITY

E. Bradford Burns's account of regionalist thought in Iowa compiles the ideas, texts, and artistic productions that have defined Iowa's character and experience for the state's residents, the country, and

even the world. Burns's chronological parameters are the publication in 1894 of Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols*, a major statement on regionalist theory, and the death in 1942 of Grant Wood, the person to whom the world is most indebted for iconic understanding of Iowa. Congruent with these dates are larger patterns that impelled regionalist thought in Iowa: growing industrialization, capitalization, and urbanization in the state and the nation, galvanized by World War II and leading to a consciousness of a receding rural past, the defining characteristic of Iowa.

Underlying Burns's definition of regionalism is the idea that "self and place intertwined" (10), and that the fundamental element of Iowa's regional character is the relationship between the rural "folk" and the land. Burns makes a distinction between "the Iowa of fact," that of the folk's experience, and the "Iowa of perception" (ix), the expression of that experience in writing and art by intellectuals. Common to both the folk and the intellectual, however, is what Burns calls "the rooted mind" (xi). Unlike most U.S. social and intellectual experience of the early twentieth century, which is characterized by the "homeless mind" (xi), Iowans took pride in the intimate relationship between self and place that led to rootedness.

Perhaps the greatest strength and greatest service of this book is that it compiles a record of the personalities and ideas of a particularly fruitful period of regionalist thought in Iowa. While it is good to read about such familiar names as Hamlin Garland, Grant Wood, Ruth Suckow, Frank Luther Mott, John T. Frederick, and Paul Engle, it is especially enlightening to read about those whose impact was major in their time but may have been forgotten now: writers Johnson Brigham, Thomas Herringshaw, Jay G. Sigmund, Beulah Meier Pelton, and Herbert Quick, artists Jay N. "Ding" Darling and Christian Petersen, and others. One might question Burns's emphasis on fiction writers, but he makes a good case for the failure of historians, for example, to capture the regional character of Iowa, and there is substantial discussion of visual artists (though I find it puzzling that there are no illustrations of Grant Wood paintings to accompany their written interpretations). Perhaps, though, some more discussion of other forms, such as music, and their practitioners would have expanded the regionalist canvas even more effectively. Nevertheless, what distinguishes this entire group of intellectuals from similar enclaves in other parts of the country is the uncommon cooperation and community among them, as well as their personal rootedness to the place they write about. What emerges from these thinkers is an especially coherent, and thus powerful, image of what Iowa experience has been all about: its valorization of place and rural culture.

The danger of this seeming harmony in Burns's subject matter is being seduced by its affirmative tone into a lack of critical probing. While I celebrate Burns's accomplishment in his chronicle, I am disappointed in his lack of grappling with a number of tough issues that even he himself raises. First, the danger of talking about "a sense of place" is its vagueness, and the book tends not to explicate precisely what the concept entails. Burns and the thinkers he talks about usually fall back on general notions of "spirit" and "values" without much specific or critical examination of exactly what those things are.

Second, the phenomenon of the intellectual providing expression for the folk needs interrogation. Burns seems to gloss over the inherent elitism of this notion, even though he admits that while Iowa intellectuals are notable for their actual experience on the land, their intellectual work emanates from the cities and universities. Burns describes the intellectual regionalist's task as "providing meaning in what ordinarily might seem like chaos" (14). This implies, disturbingly, an inability of the "folk" to know what their lives are about and fails to question the ability of people who have given up the folk life to express it truly. For example, there is ample opportunity to take Hamlin Garland to task for his widely acknowledged abandonment of the Midwest for the intellectual circles of the East, and while even some of the regionalists Burns quotes do so, he himself seems hesitant to explore the issue critically.

One other seeming fault of the book is its lack of representation of women and minority thinkers and artists. While Burns does give major attention to Ruth Suckow and does mention some other important contributions by women, the book is essentially about a "boys' club." If in fact the intellectual production during this period *was* almost exclusively male, it seems incumbent upon Burns to confront that fact, investigate why, and analyze the impact of such exclusiveness on the ability of the produced thought to reflect Iowa experience fully and accurately. Relatedly, while Iowa is obviously a more racially homogeneous place than many other parts of the country, the agricultural and small-town character that the regionalists celebrate was built upon the sacrifices and elimination of native peoples. Neither the intellectuals Burns discusses nor Burns himself honestly engages this fact, except for a brief "noble savage"-type description of Black Hawk. And certainly there must be some unrecovered contributions to Iowa regional culture, even in this period, by African Americans and others.

Despite the faults and blind spots of the book, *Kinship with the Land* is an important contribution to the recovery of a strong regionalist tradition in the state and in many ways is indispensable. The ways in which the book declines to confront some complicated critical

problems are also an invitation for others to open up discussion about the full diversity of Iowa regionalism.

The State Historical Society of Iowa posthumously awarded E. Bradford Burns the 1997 Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing *Kinship with the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894-1942* as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 1996.

Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio, by Donald Warren. New York and London: The Free Press, 1996. ix, 376 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID R. MCMAHON, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

One might have thought that Alan Brinkley had said all there was to say about the life of Charles Coughlin. His prize-winning book, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (1982), broke new ground in taking the ideas and methods of depression-era political fringe groups seriously. But Donald Warren, a professor of sociology and anthropology at Oakland University, has taken us one step further with what is perhaps the definitive study of Coughlin, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio*.

Warren argues that we need to look no further than the life of Father Coughlin to understand the history of hate or talk radio and much of the televangelism of our time. Father Coughlin perfected the formula of politically oriented talk radio and created one of the most powerful electronic communities ever to exert its force on the American political system. The author recounts the story of how one parish priest emerged from obscurity to command the attention of millions of listeners and the ear of some of the most powerful political leaders of his time. Until they broke away from him, Coughlin was a confidant of Joseph Kennedy, Detroit mayor Frank Murphy, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, among others. Warren claims that Coughlin virtually ended President Herbert Hoover's political career with his powerful on-air attacks. Democrats rewarded him with an invitation to speak at the 1932 Democratic Convention. Intoxicated by power, Coughlin's own excesses led to his downfall and his somewhat belated silencing by the Catholic Church in 1942. His break with Roosevelt in 1936, and his increasingly strident anti-Semitism late in the decade, marked the fall of this once popular priest.

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.