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## Comment

John Ely Briggs

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## Comment by the Editor

### HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical fiction is a paradox on the face of it. History can not be fictitious or it ceases to be history. Yet probably no historian has ever succeeded in telling the whole truth. Some facts in the annals of mankind are unknown and thousands of others are necessarily suppressed—for lack of space if for no better reason. On the other hand the writers of fiction have seldom if ever succeeded in eliminating the elements of time and place. Perhaps an exception should be made of some of Poe's stories, but a novel without a setting is inconceivable. The fidelity with which the novelist portrays the historical background is to a large extent the measure of the reality of the tale, while disregard for the facts of time and place is the highway to fairy-land and fantasy.

Where is the boundary line between the realms of fact and fancy? It is not always easy to locate, but the best guide seems to be the purpose of the writer. The historian should be judged by historical standards, while the novelist may be permitted to "throw the graces of fiction over the sharp, hard facts that historians have labouriously gathered", as Gertrude Atherton admits she did in *The Conqueror*. A

novel should never be treated as history, for its object is not to teach facts but to picture life artistically. Fiction should be judged only as literature.

#### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF NOVELISTS

While it would be absurd to depend upon the Waverley novels for a true conception of medieval England or to study the Civil War in *The Crisis*, there is no denying that such books have served to vitalize the times with which they deal. The manners and customs of people form the warp and woof of the literary fabric: the plot is only the pattern. The setting of a novel conscientiously drawn and characters portrayed true to type may contribute a clear understanding of folks and things as they were; but let the book be carelessly written and a false impression is made which history can never correct. The vivid imagery of a novel can not be erased at will and supplanted by the dimly remembered and unrelated facts of formal history.

It behooves the writers of fiction to have a care for the injustice they may do to the past and the harm they may cause in the present. Abbie Gardner Sharp maintained that the Spirit Lake Massacre might never have occurred if her mother had not obtained an erroneous notion of Indian character from reading "so much of James Fenimore Cooper down there in New York". If her faith in the honor of savages had been founded on facts she would not have prevailed on her husband to admit Inkpaduta's

Indians into the cabin on that fateful evening in March, 1857. Whether or not resistance would have materially altered the course of events is a question, but the incident is a striking illustration of the powerful influence of fiction.

#### THE REALISM OF HERBERT QUICK

Few novelists have been more faithful to facts than Herbert Quick in *The Hawkeye*. The characters are essentially true to type, the conversation is replete with half-forgotten colloquial expressions of the past generation, and the splendid descriptions are vivid because they are real. Some critics will say there are too many pages of color and complain of the leisurely digressions, but those who remember Iowa as it was in the seventies will revel in the reminiscent descriptions of thrashing and corn husking, of gopher snaring and prairie chicken shooting, and of Fourth of July celebrations in the days of horses and buggies. The novel is redolent of the prairies and the people of Iowa fifty years ago. Therein is the charm of the book.

Convinced of the elements of great art in Iowa materials, Mr. Quick has found it unnecessary to distort the facts for the sake of sensational circumstances or dramatic episodes. Many years ago he investigated the system of political "boodle" in Woodbury County and discovered, among other irregularities, that in "some cases the approaches to bridges were built and charged twice, once to the

road fund and once to the bridge fund. The man who did the work got one payment and the grafters got the other." Compare that commentary with this from *The Hawkeye*: "Paul read the statement of a man who had at the request of a county supervisor, put in duplicate bills for making approaches to bridges, one bill in each case against the bridge-fund for the supervisor and another against the road-fund for himself." The Monterey County "Ring" is no myth.

The terrific climax of the book, describing the lynching of Pitt and Bowie Bushyager, is a remarkably accurate account of what actually happened to Manse and Fin Rainsbarger in Eldora on the night of June 4, 1885. The Bushyagers of *The Hawkeye* are unmistakably the Rainsbargers of reality whose true history may be read in the story of "An Iowa Doone Band".

*The Hawkeye* is epical.

J. E. B.