

The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America

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combination of decentralized production and centralized distribution that proved crucial in marketing an illegal product. It helped that a homogeneous German Catholic population—even including a monsignor—considered the enterprise more congenial than the federal mandate.

By *gentlemen* in the title Bauer means not a social class but the opposite of *gangster*; his contrasts to Capone in Chicago, and even the scene in Des Moines, argue for the moral superiority of rural values of solidarity. Certainly the episode of Irlbeck and his nemesis, federal revenueur B. F. Wilson, conversing on the street and agreeing to disagree with a handshake, without either relenting from their respective jobs, seems impossible to imagine in Chicago and improbable in Des Moines. The source for this encounter, an oral history tape of Joe and Laretta Irlbeck, probably deserves more skepticism than Bauer gives it. As Bauer also points out, other rural Iowa bootleggers were not so gentle or so scrupulous.

Bauer argues that the agonies of the 1920s rural depression were mitigated in Carroll County by Irlbeck's imaginative and immensely profitable bootlegging operation. One might quibble with his description of the outlier counties in Iowa that voted for Al Smith in 1928. Bauer attributes Plymouth County's vote to being adjacent to Sioux City (139). I suspect it was due more to a combination of Catholic votes and the extreme agricultural depression in Plymouth County; Bauer does later cite Ferner Nuhn's article in the *Nation* documenting the Farm Holiday uprising in Plymouth County.

The recent accusation—after the publication of the book—that the contemporary incarnation of Templeton Rye may not be based on the Prohibition-era recipe or made in Iowa after all, raises the question of what Irlbeck would have thought about that: whether hustling government regulators or providing quality product would be paramount. I suspect that he would have thought it a false choice and wanted both.

In any case, my initial expectations were correct: this is a very entertaining, as well as informative, read.

The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America, by Edward White. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 377 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 hardcover.

Reviewer R. Tripp Evans is professor of art history at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Grant Wood: A Life* (2010).

Nickolas Muray's 1925 photograph of the writer and artist Carl Van Vechten neatly captures his subject's charismatic complexity. Dressed

as a dandy yet glowering with studied intensity, Van Vechten appears to pull a cane from the hat in his hand—a gesture that is part sexual innuendo, part magic trick. Edward White’s masterful new biography of Van Vechten, *The Tastemaker*, provides a similarly revealing portrait of this native Iowan who became one of the most important cultural arbiters of the Jazz Age. Van Vechten’s taboo-shattering persona and work distinguished him even among his rather dazzling generation, yet today he is less well known than many of the figures about whom he wrote. In White’s beautifully crafted biography, he reemerges to provoke and charm us anew.

Born into a prosperous Cedar Rapids family in 1880, Van Vechten learned early on to believe in his own exceptional gifts and to appreciate the thrill of shocking his peers. Like fellow midwesterners Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, Van Vechten later lampooned his region as a place of stifling repression and small-mindedness. (Cedar Rapids became the backwater Maple Valley in his 1924 novel, *The Tattooed Countess*.) Van Vechten later advised a young William Shirer that he needed to “get the hell out of Cedar Rapids” (158).

Upon graduation from the University of Chicago in 1903, Van Vechten entered journalism, eventually landing at the *New York Times* as the music and modern dance critic. Although his enthusiasm sometimes outstripped his expertise, he tirelessly educated his readers about the exciting new forms he encountered; as he once quipped, “Americans are inclined to look everywhere but under their noses for art” (132). By the mid-1910s, Van Vechten had become an intimate of the avant garde himself, traveling in circles that included Mabel Dodge, the Fitzgeralds, and Gertrude Stein (he later became Stein’s literary executor). Married to the long-suffering actress Fania Marinoff, Van Vechten maintained a frenetic schedule of travel, drinking, and extramarital affairs, while managing to write seven successful (if now mostly forgotten) novels.

Above all, it was Van Vechten’s role as a “bullhorn for the Harlem Renaissance” (4) that most clearly defined him as a writer. Introduced to Harlem circles by the author Walter White, Van Vechten was one of the first establishment critics to promote the Blues as an important form of American music, and also to advance the careers of black writers and entertainers—among them James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson. At the heart of Van Vechten’s celebration of Harlem was the “unwieldy idea,” as White explains, that “blackness contain[ed] the essence of modern art” (107).

Given his self-image as an insider, Van Vechten believed that his 1926 novel about Harlem, bearing the intentionally outrageous title *Nigger*

Heaven, would be widely celebrated there as the first serious examination of a place he genuinely admired. It was not. Although the book was a financial success, the insult of its title—slang for a segregated theater balcony—severed many of Van Vechten's connections to Harlem and, in certain respects, to posterity.

Van Vechten would reinvent himself in the 1930s as a celebrity photographer, capturing some of the twentieth century's most iconic portraits of figures from Henri Matisse to Eartha Kitt. Connected to this documentary passion (Van Vechten neither charged for his portraits nor sold them), was his last great obsession: the creation of two major archives devoted to American music, writing, and theater for Yale and Fisk universities. Chief among his archival subjects was, naturally, himself. White deserves high praise for so thoroughly mining this mountain of material.

Whereas Bruce Kellner's 1968 biography of Van Vechten benefited from their friendship, White's emotional and temporal distance from his subject lends his project greater objectivity as well as access to more recent scholarship. His nuanced treatment of the Harlem Renaissance's multilayered racial politics, and of the Byzantine rules that once structured the lives of gay men, demonstrate his impressive command of contemporary identity politics and post-Stonewall criticism. White writes thoughtfully about what it meant for Van Vechten to negotiate his many conflicting worlds, and he is particularly deft at handling his subject's own contradictory character.

While never apologizing for Van Vechten's racial paternalism or irresponsible behavior, White makes a persuasive case for his lasting contributions to American modernism and genuine sense of conviction. Steering clear of both exposé and hagiography, he provides a portrait that—like Muray's 1925 photograph—demonstrates both Van Vechten's seriousness of purpose and his devilish sleight of hand.

Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau's Image, by Matthew Cecil. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014. x, 355 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Frank Durham is associate professor in the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. His research and writing have focused on critical analyses of media framing processes.

Matthew Cecil's meticulously researched and thoroughly engaging history of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and its public relations-driven, myth-making machine should appeal to lay readers while making significant contributions to the scholarship on the topic. In approaching this sub-