

# Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War

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works. Drake and a local bank hired Mies van der Rohe in the 1960s, and the Art Center continued its patronage by hiring I. M. Pei and, in the 1980s, Richard Meier. Again, these were joined by local work of similar quality. Chick Herbert, Ray Crites, and Brooks, Borg, and Skiles all combined international modernism with pragmatism and restraint; if it is possible to realize a modest monumentality, Herbert's Civic Center (1975) toes this delicate line with grace and power.

Pridmore's approach is admirable for its ability to show that these buildings were not isolated drawing-board exercises but rather were the result of social, financial, and cultural connections that were fostered by Des Moines's tightly knit business and civic community. He explains these buildings gracefully and legibly, and his choice of themes is apt, covering nearly every aspect of the city's design history. Readers may wish for more emphasis on the vernacular, as Pridmore's emphasis is on the monuments and mansions that exemplify the city's outstanding moments and characters. And scholars may regret the absence of footnotes, which might have inspired others to delve more deeply into some of the building histories that Pridmore tells so lucidly. Finally, any reader contemplating a driving tour will need some supplemental research to place these buildings into geographical context; the city's relationship to its rivers and its hinterland has influenced parks and infrastructure that could have formed an additional essay or map.

Still, Pridmore has written what will deservedly be the standard history of the city's architecture. It will be a vital source for any student of the city, and it lives up to the rich legacy of built work produced there over the last 150 years. Gebhard and Mansheim's guidebook will still find a place in the back seat of any windshield historian's car, but it has, after 20 years, found a worthy companion that ties its catalog of Des Moines's buildings into readable, enlightening, and richly elucidating essays.

*Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, by Eric Bennett. *The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. xi, 232 pp. Notes, index. \$22.50 paperback.

Reviewer Catherine Stewart is professor of history at Cornell College. She is the author of *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (2016).

Eric Bennett's *Workshops of Empire* has an ambitious agenda: to prove that the writing programs that flourished in the wake of World War II, particularly at the University of Iowa and Stanford University, were the result of Cold War objectives. Bennett aims to identify the various intel-

lectual, artistic, and ideological currents that contributed to the emergence of MFA programs. But he has an even more audacious goal: to historicize and, by so doing, expose how today's creative writing programs continue to "reflect the intellectual shape and the institutional form of the creative writing programs of the early Cold War" (172). There is an irony at the heart of Bennett's argument that he doesn't want readers to miss, namely, that programs that strove to inculcate a literary style that espoused humanist values of individualism in order to challenge totalitarian group think, instead squelched individual expression.

Bennett strives to differentiate his work from Mark McGurl's groundbreaking *The Program Era* (2009), which established the study of creative writing programs as an essential part of American literary history. *Workshops of Empire* brings something new to this emerging field by unearthing and persuasively documenting how the genesis of writing programs like Iowa's and Stanford's cannot be understood without examining their role in the Cold War and their directors' commitment to using these programs as another front for fighting an all-consuming battle against totalitarianism and communism. Bennett firmly establishes both Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner as cultural cold warriors, although he is less successful in making his larger claim that their agendas directly shaped the writing produced by numerous graduates, many of whom went on to establish their own writing programs.

Bennett argues that Engle's and Stegner's approaches were grounded in the New Humanism, a conservative literary movement predicated on a rejection of modernism and its moral relativism. The New Humanism dovetailed neatly with Cold War fears of totalitarianism, mass culture, and atomic warfare, elevating the stakes of literary production as both an antidote and a weapon. This led private institutions, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, to underwrite programs like the Iowa Writers' Workshop and literary journals like the *Kenyon* and *Sewanee* reviews. It also enabled the entrepreneurial Engle to secure donations from Cold War funding sources by arguing that the writing program was an effective means of combatting anti-American attitudes.

In the book's strongest chapter, Bennett examines Engle and his directorship of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Bennett's métier is biography, and his skillful weaving together of archival evidence yields a portrait of Engle as simultaneously likeable, sympathetic, funny, and impassioned. Even as Engle changed his writing and politics to fit the prevailing mood, from 1930s fellow traveler to postwar anticommunist, he strikes one as sincere in his passions.

Bennett is not a historian, however. He struggles to move between larger historical trends and the localized histories of the writing programs. Broad swaths of history are glossed in such a manner as to prove meaningless and unhelpful to readers: “Rapid changes touched everybody and divided the forward-looking from the backward-glancing. Was the future the solution or the problem? Was the nation halfway to salvation or farther from it than ever before?” (18). Bennett wishes to destroy the canard that MFA programs were apolitical, removed from larger forces such as Cold War fears and strategies, but he winds up reiterating another one—that of a Cold War consensus. He relies on ill-defined terms such as “Cold War agenda” and “Cold War intellectual consensus” without explaining or identifying whose agenda was being carried out. Bennett ignores the scholarship that proves the very idea of a Cold War consensus was another fiction, albeit a politically useful one. As scholars such as Alan Brinkley have documented, this “consensus” was an illusion, particularly when it came to intellectuals and writers. Writers were more often the target of Cold War apparatus than its beneficiaries. However, Bennett only touches on this briefly when he discusses Engle’s dismaying encounter with Red Scare allegations in 1952 that led to the cancellation of an invited lecture at Marshall College.

*Workshops of Empire* is not recommended for general readers, as it is challenging in both its prose style and its assumptions. However, it will certainly prove of interest to researchers of Iowa history for its treatment of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the intriguing use of archival evidence from the Paul Engle Papers at the University of Iowa, a collection that deserves further study.

*A Wrestling Life: The Inspiring Stories of Dan Gable*, by Dan Gable with Scott Schulte. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. xvi, 155 pages. Illustrations, appendixes, index. \$23.00 hardcover.

Reviewer David R. McMahon is professor of history at Kirkwood Community College, Iowa City Campus. Much of his research and writing have focused on Iowa’s sport history.

Often described as the most successful coach in collegiate history, Dan Gable earned the right to impart life lessons. The architect of one of the most dominating dynasties in collegiate sports—coaching the University of Iowa Hawkeyes to 15 national wrestling titles, his views on life and how to succeed are worth considering. Fortunately for Gable, he found an eager partner in Scott Schulte. Published by the University of Iowa Press, *A Wrestling Life* is an easy read but rather light fare for an academic press. It has merit in sports literature if only for what it ignores.