

Scandinavians in the State House: How Nordic Immigrants Shaped Minnesota Politics

Anna M. Peterson
Luther College

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Peterson, Anna M.. "Scandinavians in the State House: How Nordic Immigrants Shaped Minnesota Politics." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 312-314.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12484>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

by the war. In early 1863 he made a telling comment regarding the difficulty of serving in an army of occupation: "They said that they was good Union people but it is hard to tell who is for the Union down here" (53).

Among the most fascinating aspects of the Standards' correspondence are William's expressions of his hatred of the army and the correspondence about leaving it. In 1863 William discussed surrendering to guerrillas in Tennessee rather than to regular Confederate forces. The guerrillas, so their story went, paroled their prisoners and allowed parolees to go home. William eventually recognized the improbability of that plan, but that did not stop him from planning his separation. Later that year, both William and Jane made cryptic comments about some "experiment" by which William would leave the army. Jane later replied that she was glad William "made up your mind not to desert" (158). Around that time, they made several comments about moving to California, which may have been part of the plan for desertion. Soon after, however, William contented himself with applying for a discharge (for which he was rejected) and pledging to do his duty. After participating in the Grand Review in May 1865, William praised the generals on the reviewing stand as "the greatest in the world" and affirmed his sense of accomplishment in serving the Union cause. "I will tell you," he wrote, "it makes me feel proud to see so many nice faces, and so many fine little girls and boys, greeting the sunburnt soldier welcome back to his home" (261).

Anyone interested in the Iowa wartime experience will learn a great deal from *This Infernal War*. Although the Standards were from Illinois (via Tennessee on Jane's side), it is not difficult to imagine that their attitudes paralleled those of numerous Iowa couples. Furthermore, the struggles they endured were commonplace across the western states, regardless of political affiliation. My only criticism of the book is that the publisher used a miniscule font size for the epilogue, making it difficult to read. That is a comparatively minor detraction, however, from what is a well-edited, thoroughly annotated, and remarkable collection of letters.

Scandinavians in the State House: How Nordic Immigrants Shaped Minnesota Politics, by Klas Bergman. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017. 304 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Anna M. Peterson is assistant professor of history at Luther College. Her research and writing have focused on Norwegian American immigrant women during the Progressive Era.

During the period of mass immigration, millions of Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Finns, and Icelanders made homes for themselves in the state of Minnesota. Like other immigrant groups, these immigrants had a lasting impact on the history of the United States. In this book, Klas Bergman argues that Nordic immigrants have had a particularly strong political influence in American politics in general, but in Minnesota politics in particular. Bergman sets out to trace this influence over time and to demonstrate that Nordic immigrants shaped Minnesota's political culture in ways that are still evident today.

This main argument is largely organized chronologically, tracing Nordic immigrants' active participation in Minnesota politics from the "four pioneers" of Minnesota politics in the 1880s—Norwegian Knute Nelson and Swedes John Lind, John A. Johnson, and Adolph Olson Eberhart—to the lingering Scandinavian flavor of Minnesota politics non-Scandinavian politicians still operate within today. Bergman does an excellent job of balancing the biographies and contributions of Minnesota "greats" such as Charles A. Lindbergh Sr., Hubert Humphrey, and Walter Mondale with the actions of ordinary men and women living in places like rural Otter Tail County and the Iron Range. In doing so, Bergman illustrates how Nordic immigrants shaped Minnesota politics at the local, state, and national level. They were governors, U.S. senators, and vice presidents as well as union organizers, Nonpartisan League recruiters, temperance champions, and woman suffrage activists. It is the sum of these actions that left such an enduring mark on Minnesota politics.

Bergman is careful to show how politicians invoked, adapted, and abandoned their Nordic pasts at different points in history. His work reveals the process through which ethnic identities factored into political identities. First-generation immigrant politicians in the 1880s, as well as politicians today, had to balance Scandinavian and American identities to suit their audiences and political needs. Although Bergman is right to emphasize that the ethnic identification of Scandinavian politicians waned after World War I, by telling the story up until the present day, he is able to show the continued utility of a Nordic identity in Minnesota politics. The quote he includes from Minnesota House Representative Paul Thissen, a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), demonstrates this nicely: "I don't think of myself as a Scandinavian politician, although in some sense I guess I do because it allows me to connect with people in a particular way. It's still an asset in Minnesota to be of Norwegian or Scandinavian descent" (189).

This book promises to appeal to a diverse audience. Although Bergman's focus is on Minnesota politics, he does engage in discussions of Scandinavians' influence on national politics and includes cases from

nearby states, North Dakota in particular. His findings offer a fruitful basis from which other scholars can draw comparisons between the Scandinavian influence on Minnesota politics and other states with large Scandinavian American populations, such as Iowa.

Bergman's background as a journalist and author is evident in his accessible and engaging writing style. The book is written for a broad audience, but scholars will also be interested in Bergman's findings. His arguments are based on extensive research, including an impressive number of interviews. One of the major drawbacks of the book is the way the references have been relegated to the back of the book. The "Notes" section provides citations for the sources used in the text but is relegated to the back of the book, and individual notes do not correspond to a number or symbol in the text itself; one must hunt to find where exactly the quoted material and contextual analysis come from.

That flaw aside, *Scandinavians in the State House* is an excellent resource for anyone interested in regional politics in general and immigrant engagement in and influence on U.S. politics specifically. Bergman draws thought-provoking parallels between the historic development of Scandinavian settlement and active participation in politics with Minnesota's newest population of immigrants from Somalia. These arguments, along with the many others he presents throughout the book, promise to stimulate much discussion of the legacy of Scandinavian influence on Minnesota politics and the ways immigrants can shape the nature and character of a state's political identity.

Out Where the West Begins, volume 2, *Creating and Civilizing the American West*, by Philip F. Anschutz. Denver: Cloud Camp Press; distributed by University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. 392 pp. Illustrations, timeline, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer J. T. Murphy is professor of history at Indiana University South Bend. His research and writing have focused on frontier settlement, the Oregon Trail, and the military history of the nineteenth-century U.S. West, among other topics.

In volume one of *Out Where the West Begins*, Philip F. Anschutz, a Denver-based corporate executive, celebrated past economic success in the American West by profiling 49 men whose success seemed to herald his own. For his follow-up, subtitled *Creating and Civilizing the American West*, he focuses on 100 men and 8 women who "stand out for their achievements in western policymaking, exploration, innovation, military defense, conservation, image making, opinion shaping, and social reform" (13). It is an idiosyncratic list that includes Thomas Jefferson