

The Driftless Reader

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Book Reviews and Notices

The Driftless Reader, edited by Curt Meine and Keefe Keeley. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017. xxxix, 348 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$26.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Patrick Nunnally is coordinator of the River Life Program, part of the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. His Ph.D. dissertation (University of Iowa, 1990) was "Visions of Sustainable Place: Voice, Land, and Culture in Rural America."

The "Driftless Region," so called because the most recent glaciations missed the area and therefore did not leave the deep glacial "drift" soils that characterize so much of the upper Midwest, has long been recognized as anomalous within the broader historical and geospatial contexts of the Midwest. The terrain is steep and rocky, with bluffs drained by a network of rivers, most prominently the Mississippi. Distinctive topography has created conditions for specialized ecologies; plant communities found here are more characteristic of distant places. The area's lands and waters, near the watershed boundaries of the Mississippi River basin and the Great Lakes, have given rise to distinctive historical patterns of settlement, resource exploitation, and conservation that are interesting and nationally significant.

The region in question encompasses southeastern Minnesota, southwestern Wisconsin, generally along the Wisconsin River, extreme northwestern Illinois in the area around Galena, and northeastern Iowa. It centers around the historic lead mining region, includes rivers that were major fur trade and lumber transportation routes, and bears many earthen mounds left by indigenous inhabitants over thousands of years. A number of books have explored this place, usually through the medium of personal essay and reflection. Editors Curt Meine and Keefe Keeley pursue a different approach, excerpting 81 works of prose and poetry created across a span of some 350 years, adding a number of visual works as well such as maps, painting, etchings, and drawings. Meine is a conservation biologist who is the author of a well-known biography of Aldo Leopold, and Keeley manages a regional nonprofit that brings ecological and agricultural knowledge together. Their choices are judicious and reflect well both the historical and biological/physical systems that make up this complicated place.

The book is composed of 12 sections, which are arranged more or less chronologically. Each section is headed by a short overview, and each piece is introduced by the editors. This editorial touch offers an

important “wayfinding” in a book like this, which has poetry and memoir juxtaposed with nineteenth-century scientific journals. The sections begin with the land. Then a section on “Ancient Peoples” is followed by a collection on “Historical Ecologies.” Here the editors’ sense of the dynamic forces at work in the driftless becomes clear. The region isn’t the same topographically or ecologically as it was 10,000 years ago, 1,000 years ago, or even 100 years ago. Incessant physical forces of running water carrying soil mean that vegetation changes in ways visible and invisible. This sense of a “landscape in motion” is paralleled in the ordering and composition of sections; topics and excerpts are not strictly chronological or artificially thematic. “Historical Ecologies” is followed by “Native Voices” and then by “Explorations,” a section that opens with a mid-twentieth-century poem about crossing the Mississippi in a rapidly moving car and closes with a personal history essay on gathering moss at the turn of the twenty-first century and a poetic meditation/reflection on fishing. The sections pick up with “Early Economies,” “Settler Stories,” and “Farming Lives” before turning to “Waterways” and “Conserving Lands.” Readers should be creative in exploring the book, forming their own orders and following their own interests across the range of subjects and titles.

The sections Meine and Keeley develop may frustrate scholars and academic experts in these fields of study. “Settler colonialism” is a central theoretical critique in the academy these days, and the selections of readings don’t really respond to that critique, although a college course, for example, might use them as texts for analysis. The discussion of acquisition and economic ordering of the land through survey, treated here as a rather painless process, might usefully be brought into discussion with other texts to explore the topic more deeply.

The readings demonstrate how the various colonial enterprises of the French, Spanish, and British, not to mention the American, all played out here. The driftless may have been out of the way of the dominant narratives of cross-country exploration, railroad-based expansion, and urban growth, but nevertheless events here were central to broader reaches. Often overlooked, for example, is the conservation history of the region, with soil conservation by watershed discussed here. Another story, perhaps in a subsequent volume, would include the establishment of the Upper Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Refuge by Will Dilg and the Izaak Walton League.

A place-based approach like this, so long out of fashion in academic scholarship, offers a chance to learn a little about many things that would be found in different departments or even colleges in a university. Native people, ecology, history, hydrology—all are contained

here; sometimes, as in excerpted work by Robin Wall Kimmerer, several strands come together in one piece.

The book is valuable simply for the lovely writing and illustrations it has gathered. But it is also testimony to impressive erudition and the result of a bold vision. Other editors would have sorted differently, would have perhaps made more clear why “Ancient Peoples” has so much writing by recent European settlers, but it’s a good discussion to have and exemplary of how other place-based writers might want to think about the layering in their landscapes.

Locale and Universe: The Shared Story of the Heartland’s Lucas County, Iowa, and the American Nation, 1846–2012, by Franklin D. Mitchell. Self-published, 2016. 480 pp. Maps, illustrations, table, notes, bibliographical essay. \$32.00 paperback.

Reviewer Kimberly K. Porter, a native of Poweshiek County, Iowa, is professor of history at the University of North Dakota. Her work has focused on local, rural, and agricultural history and oral history. She is working on a biography of Iowan Henry Field.

Self-published books are often poorly received: the editing is usually poor, the argument flimsy, the purpose vague. . . . That can be said of some works I’ve been called upon to review or have stumbled upon in research endeavors, but it’s not entirely true of Franklin D. Mitchell’s history of Lucas County, Iowa.

Mitchell, emeritus professor of history at the University of Southern California, is trained in the ways of academic research and writing, which shows throughout the text. He has also published previously, most notably *Harry S. Truman and the News Media: Contentious Relations and Belated Respect* (1998).

Mitchell’s goal in undertaking *Locale and Universe* is unstated at the onset, but as his work comes to a close, he records his purpose, using the third person: “A historian, native of the county but a non-resident for many years, became a resident once again in the new century’s first decade to take the retrospective measure of a people and a place in time. He recalled in his mind the county’s unsung citizens and its illustrious sons and daughters. They were the pioneers who settled the land and established homes, schools, churches, farms, trades, and professions, followed by railroad workers, coal miners and men and workers in numerous varied enterprises and callings” (464). Some of the county’s residents had been “gentle and wise and a few mean and cruel,” but “the historian” felt the need to tell their tale, relating it to the American experience as a whole.