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The Writer's Iowa

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The Writer's Iowa

I feel it an honor to speak on this occasion for the literary interests of our Commonwealth. The writer's Iowa must be considered from the standpoint of the present and the future rather than of the past. In the seventy-five years since the first Iowa book was published, only two or three great names have been inscribed on the record which will pass to the future as the literary history of Iowa. The development of our State has been in other directions, important, wholly necessary, but not final.

For I must seek your assent to the fundamental proposition that material achievements, however great and good, can not be final. We hear much at the present time of "the Greater Iowa Movement".

[This appraisal of the literary resources of Iowa was presented as an address in observance of Iowa Day on October 10, 1916. It is reprinted from *The Iowa Alumnus*, Vol. 14, p. 39, November, 1916.
—THE EDITOR.]

We join in looking to a greater Iowa to come, in believing in it, in working for it. Is it necessary to point out that such increased greatness, if it be true greatness, will not consist only in paved roads and taller silos, in greater crops of corn and larger shipments of live stock? These things are right and good in themselves. But in themselves they do not and will not make a truly great or greater Iowa. We are not interested in a certain Greek city in the fifth century B. C. because of the vast tonnage of raw material and finished fabric that passed through her harbor. We are interested because at that time and in that city arose mighty springs of human thought to the eternal benefiting of the race. The per capita wealth of London in 1600 means infinitely less to us than many a single line written by William Shakespeare. The material fact of the annual output of the fisheries along the Sea of Galilee is unspeakably paltry and insignificant compared with the spiritual fact of the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, the doctrine that a human life is completed by the accumulation of material wealth is not rendered any the less absurd by its seemingly wide acceptance. And the same is true of the life of a State. Iowa's enduring greatness must be of the spirit. And spiritual greatness inevitably finds expression in literature.

There is stuff for the making of literature in Iowa now. The intensity and eagerness of our lives, the aspiration and achievement so plentifully apparent,

are the elements that can make great books. There are wonderful stories in the tenuous, vibrant fabric of the business world, in the patient enthusiasm of the professions. There are great dramatic plots in Iowa agriculture, the most daring and chaotic the world has ever known, with its steady, exalting victories, and its slowly crushing defeats. There are all the colors and forms of humanity in our daily life — the mingling of races and moulding of a race — the amalgamation of ancient inheritances into a new tradition. Wonderful and holy and beautiful is it all to the writer's eye.

Already this life is beginning to find its expression. In Iowa, and in the Middle West as a whole, a younger generation of writers is beginning to voice this varied and active life, with its yet-living past and its unlimited future. Their work may or may not prove of permanent greatness. It will have done a service to the world if it interprets to the generations to come this virile life of ours. But its greatest service must consist in interpreting this life to us, who are living it to-day. If our writers are to produce a great literature, they must make us recognize the actual and potential nobility in our neighbor's life, and our own. They must inspire in us a belief in the high destiny of our State, and a desire to see a truly beautiful Iowa — a land of trees and flowers and fields and homes. They must make clear to us that our material prosperity is deadening unless it leads to nobler lives. They will have suc-

ceeded in their task if they show us that this material greatness of ours is good, because it is the means to the bringing of a truly greater Iowa — an Iowa whose greatness is of the spirit, from which are the eternal issues of righteousness and truth and beauty.

JOHN T. FREDERICK