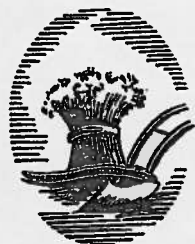


REGIONALISM and the Little Magazine



CHAPTER VIII

Two facts are clear enough. One: there is a large body of American literature that can be called regional. Two: this regional literature has stirred up an immense volume of violent controversy, in print and out of print.

As for the critical controversy, it continues unabated. The defenders and detractors of literary regionalism have piled high a mass of misinformation, wild opinion, deliberate falsification, slanderous bad temper; and the critical confusion that has

resulted will not be unscrambled for a long time. We should like to suggest in this chapter that the unscrambling can be accomplished, in large part at least, by a close study of the regional little magazines. In their pages, where regionalism was born and reared, lies the clearest revelation of the major issues involved in regional theory and practice.

The critics who have concerned themselves with regionalism would probably unite on the following description. First of all, most critics, like most laymen, would agree that regionalism is synonymous with ruralism, though these same critics might admit that there is no very good reason for ruling out large urban areas as distinctive regions, or at least as one kind of region. But since tradition has decided that regionalism is ruralism, one may say that regionalism always finds its subject matter in the country or in the small villages, towns, and cities that are closely dependent for their existence on the land. Most critics would agree, too, that any work is regional that consciously attempts to stress the distinguishing geographical, human, and cultural patterns of a regional area such as the Great Plains region or the Southwest desert region. Any artistic work is regional if the artist's primary intention is to reveal the natural and social structure of a particular, clearly definable region as it is distinguished from the natural and so-

cial structure of any other clearly definable region. Regionalism self-consciously strives to portray the all-inclusive reality of a region; it strives to show the lay of the land, the flow of the rivers, the drift of the clouds and the winds; but above all, it labors to reveal the human beings who work and sweat and die on the land, and to reveal how these human beings have built their social institutions, especially their particular colloquial language. Thus the regionalist's first interest is rarely in human psychology in its typical or "universal" aspects, and to the degree that a regional work approaches the borderline of the universal its regional emphasis becomes less noticeable. How should one classify *My Antonia*, for instance?

Additions to this description can and should be made, though it may be difficult to muster a majority agreement among the critics on either of the additions we wish to propose. The most necessary addition is this: regionalism inevitably, since it seeks the truth about the region, employs the method of objective, factual realism. As a natural consequence of the search for truth, the characters in regional novels are more often than not second-rate people, not often revelatory of man's bravest potentiality. (This depresses a good many critics who believe that a prime function of literature is to ennoble the reader's soul.) The second addition is this: regionalism is marked nearly always by an intense consciousness of nature. Nature, indeed, is sometimes so dominating that the characters are all but lost in the panorama of landscape and far horizons. And frequently nature's molding influence on the individual and on his cultural institutions is made to appear inexorably powerful, marking the fiction with the stern brand of determinism, often pessimistic determinism. Pessimistic naturalism, however, cannot be considered a mark of regionalism, for in more cases than not the tone, situation, and philosophy are optimistic.

The little magazines were the first to promote a regionalism such as has been described; and, since 1915, when John T. Frederick launched his *Midland* in Iowa City, the little magazines have been the movement's staunchest defenders. The *Midland* (1915-33) preferred to speak optimistically of the Midwest land and of its people. Though a good many of the magazine's stories were grim and pessimistic, good cheer, laughter, and love for the land pervaded most of the fiction and poetry. This tone of quiet optimism has also been conspicuous in all of the other regional little magazines, particularly in *The New Mexico Quarterly Review* (1931-) and *The Southwest Review* (1924-).

The Prairie Schooner (1927-) and *The Frontier* (1920-39),¹ have favored a more pessimistic interpretation of their regions than have the Southwestern quarterlies. *The Prairie Schooner*, speaking primarily for the Great Plains and the agricultural Midwest, and *The Frontier*, speaking for the mountains and plateaus of the Pacific Northwest, represent sections that are still largely raw and dreary expanses whose people often are forced to live on an elementary and depressing level. Perhaps the refusal to compromise with the bitter, often brutalizing reality of their regions accounts for the suspicion with which some observers have regarded both magazines.

There have also been a good many other little magazines interested in regionalism, though only partially and spasmodically. One thinks immediately of *The Reviewer*, *American Prefaces*, *Space*, and the early *Double Dealer*.

The editors of the periodicals mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs have for the most part relied on their actions (the material they printed) rather than on their words (their editorial opinions) in the fight for a new literature. At the rare intervals when they have expressed themselves formally, they have written much as Harold G. Merriam, *The Frontier's* editor, wrote in 1934:

"I should like to have writers understand regionalism not as an ultimate in literature but as a first step, as the coming to close knowledge about the life of the region in which he lives as a first necessity for sound writing, even as knowledge of oneself—'know thyself'—is also a first necessity. The 'universal,' when healthy, alive, pregnant with values, springs inevitably from the specific fact. This conception of the interpretation of life I would oppose to the idea of cosmic-minded people that understanding springs from abstract ideas and images in the mind—in the soul. To such extent regionalism in my judgment, is earth-minded."²

An understanding of the motivations that govern regionalist activity is necessary if one is to estimate justly the validity of the regionalist's argument. The regional little magazine gives this necessary understanding. The primary motivation of recent American regionalism is quietly revealed in the first issue of *The Midland*, whose editorial announcement reads in part:

¹ For the purpose of giving a more specific understanding of a representative regional little magazine, we have added to this chapter a somewhat extended discussion of *The Midland*. See pp. 140-47.

² Harold G. Merriam, "Expression of Northwest Life," *The New Mexico Quarterly*, iv, 128-29 (May 1934).

"Possibly the region between the mountains would gain in variety at least if it retained more of its makers of literature, music, pictures, and more of its other expressions of civilization. And possibly civilization itself might be with us a somewhat swifter process if expressions of its spirit were more frequent. Scotland is none the worse for Burns and Scott, none the worse that they did not move to London and interpret London themes for London publishers."³

Frederick's belief that the "spirit" of "the region" should be more frequently revealed is the first of several such little magazine statements. Thus Jay B. Hubbell, first editor of *The Southwest Review*, announced in his introductory number that he would "especially encourage those who write on Western themes, for it is a magazine of the Southwest."⁴ And Harold G. Merriam, writing to Charles Allen in 1938, a year before *The Frontier* ceased publication, stated that the purpose of his magazine was "To reveal the state of civilization in the Pacific Northwest."⁵ The conviction of these three men is the conviction of all sincere regionalists and of all sincere regional little magazines. It is a conviction that regionalists take very seriously, for a reason which is broadly hinted at in the last sentence of *The Midland* editorial:

"Scotland is none the worse for Burns and Scott, none the worse that they did not move to London and interpret London themes for London publishers."⁶ In other words, the region would be none the worse if its artists would refuse to move to New York to interpret New York themes for New York publishers. This willingness to follow Eastern publishing standards was all-prevalent during the half century following the Civil War, and to a great extent this tendency is still strong, despite the valiant efforts of the regionalists and their little magazines since 1915.

What were these literary standards demanded by the Eastern publishers? They were the moral standards of gentility and refinement. They required a mechanical formula: obvious rising action, wherein virtue and refinement struggled on fairly even terms with crudity and immorality; obvious climax and denouement, wherein virtue and refinement victoriously subdued all evil. The happy ending with good triumphant was a necessity. And there was, of course, a long list of

³ John T. Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, i, 1 (January 1915).

⁴ Hubbell, Editorial, *The Southwest Review*, x, 98 (October 1924).

⁵ Letter, Merriam to Allen, December 9, 1938 (unpublished).

⁶ Frederick, Editorial, op. cit., p. 1.

unmentionable words and actions that had to be scrupulously avoided. Above all, the writer's tone, his attitude, had to be one of sentimental optimism. Such a formula, if it allowed one to write of Winesburgs or Nebraska prairie farms at all (and it rarely did) required that the treatment be highly distorted, burlesqued, or romanticized.

As Henry Seidel Canby has recently made clear in his study of Whitman, the genteel standards expressed, in part at least, the educated public's crusade to mend the nation's manners and morals.⁷ For the educated people, including many publishers, had been profoundly shocked with the flood of crudity and brutality that swept the country during and after the hate-releasing Civil War. And so it is a little unfair to cast all the odium of blame for the vapidness of our post-Civil War fiction and poetry on the heads of the publishers. They were the victims, though often sympathetic victims, of the "climate of opinion," of the prevailing temper of the *Zeitgeist*. And needless to insist, so were most of the writers.

But the emphasis on gentility, whatever its origin and despite its motive, was more than a little vicious and dehumanizing. Certainly it was cramping and stifling for the artist, whose first responsibility is to meet life with an unflinching vision. Bound by genteel standards, he was not allowed or could not allow himself to travel far in the direction of realism and honesty. The inevitable revolt against gentility began in the late nineties and the early years of the new century. Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser were the first rebels. They were soon followed by David Graham Phillips, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather. Yet these people, all of whom insisted on reporting life realistically, did not receive a wide hearing until about 1915 or 1916 when the realistic frontal attack against refinement and sentimental romance really began in force.

The call that *The Midland* and its successors issued is to be seen as an important flanking movement of this main realistic attack against the deeply entrenched forces of gentility. The Eastern publishers, of course, were the main citadels of the enemy and the obvious focus of the attack. Frederick's motive in asking that the midland artist stay at home and fashion his own literary standards, realistic ones, is the primary motive of all regionalists and of all regional little magazines. Thus Merriam, as late as 1938, could still defend *The Frontier* with the argument that it gave "an outlet to sincere writers whose work is

⁷ Henry Seidel Canby, *Walt Whitman: An American*, New York, 1943, pp. 278-79.

good but does not appeal to commercial editors."⁸ And this is still the argument of the editors of *The Southwest Review*, *The Prairie Schooner*, and *The New Mexico Quarterly Review*.

As we have said, literary regionalism was given its first conscious statement in *The Midland* and the little magazines that followed it. Yet until the Civil War, American artists and other thinkers had assumed unconsciously much of the regionalist argument. One could, for instance, make a strong case for calling the entire New England group regionalists. And even in the period between the Civil War and the realistic revolt of the late nineties there were the notable exceptions who worked close to the regionalist pattern. One thinks immediately of Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, perhaps even more immediately of such "grim" realists as Ed Howe and Edward Eggleston. Indeed, there is much truth in Pearl Buck's observation that our literature always has been regional, that there is no such fact as a national literature, and that perhaps there will not be such a literature for many years.⁹

Nor must one forget that long before the direct pleas for literary regionalism there was a call, particularly from Frederick Jackson Turner and Josiah Royce,¹⁰ for a cultural regionalism. It was a call which had direct and obvious implications for literary men. There can be little doubt that Frederick was perfectly aware of Royce's Phi Beta Kappa address, delivered in 1902 in the home town of *The Midland*. Royce said in substance: "Let your province then be your first social idea. Cultivate its young men, and keep them near you. Foster provincial independence. Adorn your surroundings with the beauty of art. Serve faithfully your community that the nation may be served."¹¹ Obviously there is a marked similarity in purpose to be noted when we compare these thoughts with the words of Frederick which we noticed in the first *Midland* editorial.

⁸ Letter, Merriam to Allen, December 9, 1938 (unpublished).

⁹ Pearl Buck, "Introduction to the United States," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, xx, 12-13 (May 27, 1939).

¹⁰ Turner read his essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in 1893 and Royce read his paper, "Provincialism," in 1902.

¹¹ John Paul Abbott, "Regionalism" (unpublished), a summary of "Provincialism," from *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*, by Josiah Royce.

II

Merriam's conception of regionalism as it is revealed in the quotation from *The New Mexico Quarterly* is the conception of all regional magazine editors and of all regionalists. It is a perfectly sound theory. There is no apparent wish to deny the so-called "universal" elements, no apparent wish to promulgate a barren, factual realism. As a theory, it represents the program of most good artists of all times. And so it is not the theory, but the literary practice—the value of the fiction produced—among other things, that leads to dispute.

For in practice regionalism rarely transcends Merriam's "first step," the "coming to close knowledge about the life of the region . . . as a first necessity. . . ."¹² Too often the regionalist fails to probe beyond "the specific fact" to the universals. He is too preoccupied with the region's peculiarity, its eccentric detail, its uniqueness. This is true of even the best—Eudora Welty, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, William Faulkner. It is more true of the second best—William March, Paul Engle, Ruth Suckow, Wallace Stegner, Jesse Stuart, Mari Sandoz, August Derleth, James Hearst. It is painfully true of the host of little known regionalists—Loren C. Eiseley, Meridel Le Sueur, John Henry Reese, Spud Johnson, Curtis Martin, Howard McKinley Coming, Ted Olson, Roderick Lull, Upton Terrell, and many others. The writers of these last two groups are often so self-consciously regional that one experiences the unpleasant feeling of being victimized by overseriousness. Regionalism has, in effect, thrown too heavy a stress on the particular, and it would seem that this is a danger inherent in regional theory.

A pedantic and self-conscious preoccupation with the region is a grave fault, but there are other serious shortcomings to be noted. One of these is the brand of realism that the regionalists have adopted. Since their intention is to reveal the region as accurately as possible, the regionalists are naturally committed to some form of realism. Of course the realist need not preoccupy himself too closely with surface detail, with the purely external spectacle of life and nature, as is generously proved by such writers as Proust and Dostoevski. Yet the truth is that our twentieth century American realist has for the most part confined himself within the narrow boundaries of an external factualism.

Our young realistic regionalist, especially as one sees him beginning and developing in our little magazines, tends to stress the outward

¹² Merriam, "Expression in Northwest Life," pp. 128-29.

spectacle more than is usual with the young, developing nonregionalist realist. Insofar as this is true, the regionalist little magazines and the regionalists are less exciting and profitable reading than the best of the nonregionalist little magazines and nonregionalists. Time and time again, particularly in the naturalistic brand of regional fiction, the story is a chronicle of man's bitter physical struggle against an imperturbable, hostile nature. Man may challenge his enemy bravely, may go down to an inevitable tragic defeat gallantly; or, as is usually the case, he may break under the strain, become a hardened, emotionless beast. But however he responds, the focus of interest is directed not on the inner man but on the spectacle of physical, outward action. And this stress on the outward appearance is not limited to naturalistic fiction. It is also characteristic of optimistic pastoralism.

Another serious defect, a defect that can be spotted, however, with almost equal ease in our nonregional realism, is drabness of style. A realistic style need not be leaden and colorless: it can and often should flow with premeditated and vivid rhythm; it can and often should sparkle with the decisive and electric word. By the electric word and the vivid rhythm we mean the kind of tensioned prose that Katherine Anne Porter often writes. We do not refer to the overemotionalized, florid, pseudopoetic style that marks the work of a good many regionalists such as Herbert Krause, whose *Wind Without Rain* is a case in point. For every regionalist with some sense of style, such as Robert Penn Warren or Eudora Welty, there are a dozen writers of weight and drabness. But again one must remember the obvious: this lack of textural richness, this ineptness of phrase and rhythm, is typical of most of our realistic fiction, though the nonregionalist is likely to be a little less pedestrian.

A fourth observation must be made in order to judge our regional literature fairly. Regionalism, being a lineal descendant of nineteenth century local color, often shows evidences of local color faults. A good many regionalist apologists would deny their uncouth heritage, and many others would prefer to have the obvious fact forgotten. But a fact it is, and one need not possess a too perceptive eye to see a good many local color mannerisms in our modern regionalism.

Local color was a varied and many-sided movement, but only two aspects of it are relevant to this discussion—the sentimental romanticism that expressed itself through the pens of such diverse writers as James Lane Allen, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Grace King; and the humorous exaggerations that showed itself at its

frolicking best in the work of such people as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Petroleum V. Nasby, and George Ade.

The latter group was primarily inspired by the impulse to entertain through laughter. It loved to ridicule frontier uncouthness, especially frontier dialect; it reveled in humorous and satiric exaggeration and distortion of character and situation; it sometimes made humorous, more often careless, use of a broken, episodic structural framework. Much modern regionalism is prone to dialect simply because of its specialness, makes use of the episodic structure for no good reason, deals in exaggeration and distortion simply out of habit. These mannerisms are probably not general, but they are very noticeable in a good deal of our fiction. There is a considerable body of fiction labeled regional being written today that should be labeled "local color" had it been produced in the nineteenth century. We may point to such writers as Jesse Stuart, writers who capitalize on the eccentricities of dialectical language and on the eccentricities of social behavior (e.g., the naïveté of the Kentucky bumpkin).

The little magazines have reacted vigorously against the unhealthy heritage of sentimentalized pastoralism that was indulged in by one school of nineteenth century local color. Only occasionally does one find a story or novel that is suffused with an idealized or romanticized view of reality. But while this tone as a dominant is rarely found, traces of it can sometimes be observed, especially in the form of "poetic" rhapsodizing over the beauties of nature and the virtues of simple country folk. Such traces were noticeable in *The Midland*, and they can be found today in all the regional periodicals. But this mark of local color ancestry is not prevalent enough to be dangerous.

In general, one is safe in asserting that the orientation of our regionalism is radically different from our local color orientation, for though they both put emphasis on place, and though a good many writers have not altogether escaped from some of the local color angles of approach, the basic intentions of the two movements are opposed. One seeks reality, the other a conscious distortion of reality. Since there is this very real difference, both in theory and in action, it is apparent that one can for the most part ignore those commentators who still insist that regionalism and local color are identical.

Finally, many critics have frequently observed another regional error: the tendency to relive a "colorful" past or a nostalgic wish to preserve an outmoded cultural pattern. This is a charge that is persistently and loudly made by all unfriendly critics. And of course there is an

element of justice in the accusation, as even the regionalist defenders are forced to admit. Thus Lewis Mumford, one of the warmest champions of cultivating regional differences, at the time he published his brilliant *Technics and Civilization*, in 1934, warned that:

"The besetting weakness of regionalism lies in the fact that it is in part a blind reaction against outward circumstances and disruptions, an attempt to find refuge within an old shell against the turbulent invasions of the outside world, armed with its new engines: in short, an aversion from what is, rather than an impulse toward what may be. For the merely sentimental regionalist, the past was an absolute. His impulse was to fix some definite moment in the past, and to keep on living it over and over again, holding the 'original' regional costumes, which were in fact merely the fashion of a certain century, maintaining the regional forms of architecture, which were merely the most convenient and comely constructions at a certain moment of cultural and technical development; and he sought, more or less, to keep these 'original' customs and habits and interests fixed forever in the same mold: a neurotic retreat. In that sense regionalism, it seems plain, was anti-historical and anti-organic: for it denied both the fact of change and the possibility that anything of value could come out of it."¹⁸

Though we have noticed evidences of this "neurotic retreat," particularly in some earlier regionalism, we cannot agree that retreat is a besetting weakness. We have not found, in the little magazines or elsewhere, very much of a sentimental backward glance, though backward glancing of a more objective variety there is aplenty. There is little of it in fiction. Such an attitude is more noticeable in poetry, and it is quite evident in regionalist drama. But even in drama the strain is not dominant. Nor do we believe that the charge is true in reference to the exposition, which is the area that Mumford apparently has primarily in mind. Most of the regionalist exposition that has analyzed the past has not been sentimentally nostalgic. It has been for the most part straightforward, objective, historical research—certainly a valuable and necessary activity.

III

So far we have been mainly concerned with regionalist fiction. There is regionalist poetry, too, and the little magazines have been largely responsible for its development. The most striking fact about the re-

¹⁸ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, New York, 1934, pp. 292-93.

gionalist poetry of the last thirty years is the simplicity of its form and style. The verse is never complex, never "difficult," always works within traditional forms. It has a directness, an openness of word, rhythm, sound, and structure that is unpretentious and a little dull. There is little experiment, unless one wishes at this late date to think of free verse as experiment. The most radical line never ranges beyond the area explored long ago by Whitman, and usually it does not dare trust itself that far. Never can one hope to be stimulated by intricacies and subtleties. But if regionalist verse abounds with clichés, they are not unpleasant clichés, for they have not yet worn too thin. They still possess warmth and dignity, though they are no longer very exciting.

Regionalist poetry, even more than the fiction, is concerned with the outward spectacle. Indeed, much of the verse is pure nature description, a simple chronicling of woodchucks, gophers, frozen creeks, sturdy sycamores, painted deserts, and howling winds. Most of the verse gives man an incidental place, shows him influenced for good or evil by the mighty scenery that surrounds him. Sometimes he is the pitiable and uncomprehending victim of nature's immensity and imperturbability; more often he is entranced before its grandeur and mystery. In either case there is a huge sentimentalism that cannot be blinked.

We refer to the great bulk of poetry that has appeared in the regionalist little magazines; but we might add that these magazines have also published some of the distinguished work. The verse of James Hearst is a case in point. It is typical of a considerable volume of relatively unknown work, poetry which follows a tradition that stresses the importance of man and the values that he may derive from a close association with nature. It is the gentle, quiet, ennobling poetry, the poetry that is honestly convinced that nature offers solace, wisdom, humility, and strength to the man who will live with her. It is a tradition that focuses its eye on man rather than nature as the important consideration.

With the exceptions of *The Midland* and *The Prairie Schooner*, the regional periodicals have published a good many essays and articles, a few on literary regionalism, a good many colored by broader regional interests—economic, political, racial, historical. Indeed, *The Southwest Review* is primarily designed for such articles and essays; and *The New Mexico Quarterly Review* often devotes about half of its pages to such exposition. These two magazines, though unrepresentative in their preference for exposition, are typical in regard to the expository subject matter that they prefer. The nonfiction of these magazines, espe-

cially during the past ten years, usually deals with the present-day regional issues, or with plans and suggestions for future regional action. The articles cover a wide range, are likely to examine such diverse subjects as education, political reform, sociology, and economic geography. This serious concern with the present and future of the region is the kind of dynamic, cultural regionalism that Royce called for in 1902, and the kind that Howard W. Odum and Lewis Mumford and all of the best orientated regionalists have demanded. All of the little magazine editors have clearly and persuasively expressed themselves in action concerning the necessity for this dynamic present-day and future-day orientation.

The regional magazines have, however, shown a generous interest in the historical past of the regions. This is especially true of the articles and essays of *The Frontier*, *The Southwest Review*, and *The New Mexico Quarterly Review*, all of which have conscientiously performed a valuable service in adding to the record of Northwest and Southwest history, folklore, legend, and anecdote.

While speaking of exposition, notice must be given to the book reviewing in these magazines. The reviews are usually of regional titles, though not always. Competent and informative, generally written by academic persons, the critical remarks are sometimes a little heavy and uninspired.

The impression that regionalist little magazines were without reservation dedicated to regionalism is a false one. They have all shown a broad streak of cosmopolitan, eclectic interest. This is especially true of *The Southwest Review*, which inherited a good deal of the dominating cosmopolitanism of the older *Texas Review*. *The New Mexico Quarterly Review* has also cast its eye beyond regional boundaries, publishing articles on such people and topics as British fascism, Americanism, Trotsky, and D. H. Lawrence. And many of the stories and many of the poems in the magazines are no more regionally colored than the fiction of Hemingway or the poetry of John Malcolm Brinnin. In fact, entire issues sometimes are devoted to nonregional interests. Further, the authors in about 50 per cent of the cases are from outside the region.

All in all, despite obvious shortcomings, the regional periodicals and literary regionalism have much to recommend them. One can agree with Dorothy Canfield Fisher when she praises in a recent essay the regional little magazines:

"They preserve in print, as part of our variegated national riches,

writing of excellent quality which for reasons not connected with its quality would not be profitable for national-range magazines to publish. And they supply fine reading for groups of Americans who are especially qualified to savor and enjoy prose and poetry written out of the same kind of life they have known. They break up the large American unit into smaller, diversified parts, which make possible a specialized, intimate communion between authors and readers, out of the question on the large, generalized scale."¹⁴

But one can also see in these regional magazines a more important function. They serve, first of all, as the primary, advance guard force in the sturdy demand that the writer analyze realistically the life which he best knows. This is a healthy and stimulating emphasis in an America that is often all too eager to keep company with any fashionable literary movement or unprofitable idealism that may happen along. In his insistence that the artist acknowledge his "roots," that he write of the life that he truly understands, the regionalist is simply talking common sense—the common sense upon which all firm artistic structures always have been reared. It is only from such a foundation that an enduring American literature can be constructed.

IV

The *Midland's* enviable record could only have grown out of an admirable personality. That personality is John Towner Frederick.

While still an undergraduate at the State University of Iowa, in Iowa City, Frederick launched his *Midland: A Magazine of the Middle-west*. The editor, in 1915, was twenty-three years old, possessed of a discriminating literary judgment, and of a first-rate reason for starting a magazine. The reason stemmed from a recognition that Eastern commercial periodicals were not giving the best of the young Midwest writers an opportunity to be read.¹⁵ Harper's, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Scribner's, and others were at that time more concerned with name writers than with the quality of the fiction they offered their readers. New writers were, every now and again, printed by the money-making periodicals, but they were not likely to be from the midland, for most seaboard editors were determined on one of two things from a trans-

¹⁴ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Introduction," *Prairie Schooner Caravan*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1943, p. 13.

¹⁵ Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, xvi, 369 (November-December, 1930).

Allegheny writer. Either he must mold the Middlewest outlook to conform with that of the East, or the Midwest soul must be burlesqued for the amusement of the East. In either case, the writer could not honestly explore the spirit of his native people. Frederick believed his country should write, and *The Midland* was established for those artists who desired to interpret their section realistically.¹⁶ The magazine, edited by one close to the Midwest, began then as an experimental regional magazine.

Frederick had several friends who, between 1910 and 1915, contributed much towards formulating and clarifying the purpose of the magazine as it was announced in that first January issue. Most important of these associates was C. F. Ansley, during Frederick's undergraduate days head of the Iowa English Department. Ansley, more than anyone else, helped direct Frederick's thinking. Then there was Edwin Ford Piper, the regionalist poet, who gave invaluable advice and who was able to secure many of the guarantors who helped support the periodical in its beginning. Three others, undergraduates in 1915, made important contributions: Ival McPeak, R. L. Sergel, and Raymond Durboraw. These five, particularly Ansley and Piper, not only helped in formulating Frederick's thoughts on regionalism, but also offered valuable service in editorial capacities during the magazine's earlier years. And there was one other person whom we must not forget, though she was not officially connected with the review until its last two years when she served as co-editor. That person was the editor's wife. Through the magazine's entire history Esther Frederick helped guide the editorial policy and in other ways made the magazine possible.¹⁷

How the quiet and unpretentious Frederick slowly built his magazine, maneuvered it into an ever more important position, makes an interesting tale. With what vigor and delight he conducted his magazine for the midland poets and storytellers! "Sacrifice and hardship sustain *The Midland*, but it brings reward in treasure beyond price."¹⁸ There was hardship and sacrifice. Like most little magazines, *The Midland* always trod close to the edge of bankruptcy. Despite the fact that the periodical was given office space by the university, that at various times editorial assistants were supplied by the school, that the Economy Advertising Company in Iowa City always generously provided the

¹⁶ Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, i, 1 (January 1915).

¹⁷ Statement of John T. Frederick to Charles Allen, September 1937.

¹⁸ Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, vi, 2 (Jan.-Feb.-Mar., 1920).

printing at a minimum cost, and that friends contributed varying amounts of money, Mr. Frederick was constantly having to draw from his own income as a teacher to keep his project afloat.¹⁹

The financial record for 1915 is worth our attention, since it shows the hazards of starting a little magazine. There were twelve issues, each number containing 32 well printed book-size leaves, substantially bound between a tan, simply designed coverpiece. The printing bill ran to \$695, postage \$72, and other expenses to \$57, a total of \$826. The income from the subscriptions was \$285 (the review sold for \$1.25 a year in the beginning, for \$3.00 later), and there was \$245 from guarantors. Frederick was left to pay a deficit of \$263.²⁰ As Frederick became more certain of his ground, as the magazine increased in importance, it came nearer to self-sufficiency, though it never, before moving to Chicago in 1930, mustered many more than 500 subscribers. On the average Frederick did not have to reach into his own pocket for over one or two hundred dollars per year.²¹

The gradual growth of *The Midland* was not altogether due to hard work. Tact and personal charm drew to the editor many supporters. Certainly the spirit in which the magazine was conducted accounted for much of its success, as is suggested in the following paragraph, written by Frederick at the opening of his periodical's tenth year:

"It is still to me a joint adventure of readers, contributors, and editor—laborious and difficult but joyous, slightly irresponsible, and devoted most of all to the cause of good fellowship. We are seeking, to be sure, some such things as truth and beauty. But I do not want to be too rigidly convinced that I know what these things are or where to find them. Nor can I tell how long we may journey together. I am content if in this tenth volume we of *The Midland*, new friends and old, may find something pleasant in our comradeship, and something to be cherished in our freedom."²²

Here we see the very human quality of the man, the warmth of feeling which drew an ever-increasing number of readers, contributors, and other persons to devote their time and money to *The Midland* ideal. We can also sense in this quotation the calm dignity which never allowed Frederick to become a missionary crusader. He had a purpose, the challenging of Eastern commercial periodical standards, but never

¹⁹ Statement, Frederick to Allen, September 1937.

²⁰ Frederick, pamphlet enclosed with January 1916 issue of *The Midland*.

²¹ Statement, Frederick to Allen, September 1937.

²² Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, x, 64 (January 1924).

did his conviction break into ranting tirades. There were, indeed, in *The Midland's* eighteen-year history, not over a dozen pages devoted to criticism of East Coast publishing tactics, and that criticism was free of the ostentatious, reforming tone. Frederick preferred to keep himself in the background, to work quietly and let the results speak for themselves.

The Midland record during the first eight years is memorable largely for a great bulk of fine short stories and poetry. Many young writers came with great promise. They came with the honesty that Frederick called for, but they were often undeveloped as storytellers. Hours and days were spent with many of them, criticizing, encouraging, until finally several developed into artists who showed every sign of future accomplishment.²³ This coaching of the young writer is one of the primary justifications of the little magazine. It means that many persons are developed who otherwise might never be heard from. The literary flowering of the last quarter century is, in no small part, the result of little magazine editors' patience in helping the ambitious writer to come into his own. It was Frederick's ill luck that many with whom he spent laborious hours during the first eight years died before they could develop their original promise.²⁴ Others, like Walter J. Muilenburg, faded after writing a half dozen or a dozen good stories. Perhaps they were not born writers, perhaps they could only thrive under continual stimulation. As far as this generation is concerned, most of the contributors of fiction to *The Midland* in its early years are unknown, though many of these forgotten men certainly produced some fine work, stories which gained for the periodical a growing respect. "The Prairie" and "Heart of Youth," by Walter J. Muilenburg; "The Parting Genius," by Helen Coale Crew; and Harriet Maxon Thayer's "Kindred" are some of the memorable stories from this period. It was during these years, too, that Frank Luther Mott, shortly to become an editor of *The Midland*, began to contribute his first stories, among them the mystically turned "The Man with the Good Face." Then there was Howard Mumford Jones, later to become better known as a critic, who sent his first stories to Frederick.

There was one discovery from the first eight years of which any magazine might have been proud. In 1920 a story "Uprooted," by Ruth Suckow, found its way into University Hall and was published, beginning a cordial relationship between Miss Suckow and Frederick. Several

²³ Statement, Frank Luther Mott to Charles Allen, November 1937.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

of her early stories were accepted by *The Midland* and she came to Iowa City in 1922 to become an associate editor.

Practically all of *The Midland* fiction was realistic. This realism was frequently of the grim, pessimistic variety that has dominated the later regional little magazine. But, in general, *The Midland* was prone to a quiet optimism, the stories reflecting love for the land, cheerful humor, and faith in man's ability to build a dignified life. This warm and comfortable view of rural culture was usually convincing, though there were times when one suspected traces of sentimental romanticism. However, the mark of sentimentality was rarely obvious enough to destroy the essential truth.

A good deal of the early *Midland* poetry was regional and it generally revealed the merits and defects of regional verse which we have mentioned earlier. Among the first contributors of verse were Arthur Davison Ficke, Edwin Ford Piper, William Ellery Leonard, Margaret Widdemer, Witter Bynner, Ruth Suckow, and Maxwell Anderson. Only Ruth Suckow, whose first poem was printed in 1918, was discovered by *The Midland*. Those were the years when Poetry garnered discovery honors.

In 1923 Frederick decided to throw the direction of his magazine from a definitely Midwest basis to a national one. The reasons for this are readily apparent. The magazine had for some time received many manuscripts and most of its subscriptions from other sections, particularly New York and California. But more important, Frederick had come to the conclusion that the Middlewesterner was not the only one tormented by New York's prejudiced demands. Writers from New England, from Mississippi, from any region, faced the same problem as the Dakota artist. The editor believed that the midland was the best location from which to challenge, since it represented a geographic and cultural mean. But until the end in 1933, well over half the stories were by Midwestern writers and about the Midwest region.

By 1925, when Frederick moved back to Iowa City from Pittsburgh where he had been teaching in the University of Pittsburgh for two years, the editorial burdens had become heavier, and because of this he asked Frank Luther Mott to become a co-editor.²⁵ This was a wise choice, since Mott was well fitted by temperament and training to work harmoniously with Frederick. During the next five years the two men shared responsibility, both editorial and financial. The magazine prospered. In these years *The Midland* published some of the early work of

²⁵ Statement, Frederick to Allen, September 1937.

a number of writers who are now becoming famous. MacKinlay Kantor, Paul Engle, Phil Stong, James Hearst, James Farrell, David Cornel De Jong, Albert Halper, Clifford Bragdon, and Marquis Childs were among those who received early recognition from *The Midland*. These were years of hope and aspiration. In addition to the work of the above authors, the magazine printed fine stories by men like Tupper Greenwald, Warren L. Van Dine, Raymond Weeks, Leo L. Ward, and William March. Such stories as March's "The Little Wife" and Weeks's "The Hound-Tuner of Calloway" did much to place the periodical near the top of the little magazine heap. The editors dreamed of the time when their magazine could become a more potent national influence. They were keeping their eyes open for the opportunity for expansion, knowing that it might come.

And by 1930 the time appeared ripe for *The Midland* to take further steps to increase its prestige. Not only Frederick, but such shrewd observers as Edward J. O'Brien, believed that the magazine might do well to seek richer pastures. (O'Brien's early recognition had done much to help the magazine through its first perilous years.) In prefacing his volume of *Best Short Stories* for 1930, O'Brien expressed the opinion that the quality periodicals were dying on their feet. *The Century* had just expired. According to O'Brien, the quality magazines had persisted too long in giving their readers second-best stories whose only recommendations were the canonized names of the authors; the public was ready and eager for a new vitality, from whatever quarter, and would not long be put off.²⁶ To meet the demand, and for the good of American letters, O'Brien made this suggestion:

"The true remedy for this lagging behind of the better monthlies is probably the establishment of a new national monthly in the Middle West which is nearer the present centre of population. If I may venture a suggestion, I think the time is now ripe for *The Midland* to pool its interests with *The Prairie Schooner*, *The Frontier*, and perhaps one or two other regional periodicals such as *The Southwest Review*, and to issue a full-grown national monthly of belles-lettres in which short stories, poems and essays should be given pride of place. The significance of such a new national periodical would depend very largely upon its interest in discovering new writers rather than in depending upon old ones.

"If *The Midland* chooses to take the lead in this matter, I am convinced, after many years' reflection, that it has the same opportunity to

²⁶ Edward J. O'Brien, *Best Short Stories of 1930*, New York, 1930, pp. x-xi.

crystallize the best expression of contemporary national life that *The Atlantic Monthly* was able to seize upon its foundation, and that *Harper's Magazine* enjoyed a generation ago. Two generations ago Boston was the geographical centre of American literary life, one generation ago New York could claim pride of place, and I trust that the idea will not seem too unfamiliar if I suggest that the geographical centre today is Iowa City."²⁷

Frederick, however, had been considering another plan. Still dominated by his conviction that Eastern publishing influences were unwholesome, still convinced that the Middlewest was the best place to fight back at New York, Frederick decided to move his magazine to Chicago. Perhaps he was more realistic than O'Brien in selecting Chicago rather than Iowa City as the most logical point from which to attack. Chicago, the editor believed, should become the focus "because of its energy, position, printing facilities, and Poetry." And so, late in 1930, *The Midland* left Iowa City "with a box of subscription cards and a sheaf of manuscripts—alike slender, sole impedimenta of the editorial office." Though the magazine continued to be printed in Iowa City, its editorial windows now faced "black roofs and the utilitarian facade of a twelve-story garage" on Van Buren Street.²⁸ Frank Mott remained behind, and Frederick and his wife became co-editors, though Mott continued as an associate and conducted much of the Iowa City business.

Six months after the magazine had been in Chicago it flowered out in a more imposing, two-column format. The periodical was now receiving a great number of good manuscripts. The subscription list grew to 1,200, and about 2,000 copies were printed per issue.²⁹ During the next six months Benjamin Appel was discovered. To all appearances Frederick's gamble in taking the magazine to Chicago was to bear rich fruit. The magazine was daily assuming a new importance. The integrity of the editor, his unwillingness to be swayed in any fashion by commercial expediency, his fine critical sense, the financial stability which was rapidly being gained, promised much. For a few months *The Midland* prospered as it never had before, and the editor's dream appeared capable of realization. But just at the moment that success seemed assured, an ominous wind began to blow.

Storm clouds had been on the Eastern horizon even at the moment

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, xvi, 369 (November-December, 1930).

²⁹ Statement, Frederick to Allen, September 1937.

Frederick moved to Chicago. Few persons expected these clouds to develop into a serious blow. But the hurricane of financial depression swept westward from the seaboard, striking Chicago with full blast in the winter of 1931. Banks failed, bread lines grew, factories closed, business collapsed. *The Midland* was doomed.

For eighteen months the editor fought a losing battle. Subscriptions fell off; the magazine changed from a monthly to a bimonthly. Meanwhile, Frederick shouldered a debt of a thousand dollars a year,³⁰ hoping to outride the storm. But by the summer of 1933 the battle was over. We know what the magazine's end must have meant to its editor from the following quotation from the last editorial: "For nearly twenty years I have given to it money and time taken from my work as teacher and farmer, from my reading, from my family life; and though the money and time have been alike sometimes needed and hard to spare, my personal rewards have been great."³¹

Because of its contribution to the development of regionalism, *The Midland* must be ranked alongside *The Dial*, *The Little Review*, and *Poetry*. It was a magazine that discovered and helped many young authors. It published a great volume of excellent fiction. Of the 337 *Midland* stories that came to Edward O'Brien's notice, 324 were judged of high merit, 105 of them being of such distinction that he gave them his highest rating.³² Few magazines can boast such a high percentage of excellent stories. But above all, *The Midland* emphasized, perhaps more than any other periodical, what must always be the standard of any little magazine—complete integrity in upholding its standards.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Frederick, Editorial, *The Midland*, xix, 56 (June 1933).

³² O'Brien (a calculation based on the rating of *The Midland* stories from 1915 to 1933, not including the years 1922-23, since the magazine is not rated for those years).