

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dorothy Schwieder. *Iowa: The Middle Land*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996. xv + 381 pp. \$36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8138-2306-5; \$47.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8138-2307-2.

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Dorothy Schwieder has published extensively in the field of Iowa history, her studies of the Iowa coal industry and of Iowa Cooperative Extension providing particularly important additions to the Hawkeye state's history. This general history of the state will enhance her reputation still more.

It is unfortunate that many historians deprecate the study of state history as parochial and uninteresting. In fact the state provides a convenient unit of regional analysis that identifies one of the three major levels of American political activity and offers an ideal entry point as well for the study of the economic and sociocultural processes that shape and are shaped by the everyday life and decision making of Americans. It is now some twenty years since Leland Sage and Joseph Wall published one volume histories of Iowa and in preparing this volume Schwieder has faced the challenge of incorporating in her work the research findings of the state's historians since the mid 1970s as well as their changing emphases. The best state historians also produce works that have thematic or conceptual unity and they also may seek to fill the gaps in the available secondary accounts with investigations of their own.

In Schwieder's survey of Iowa history she has devoted 106 pages to consideration of "The Early Years," extending through the 1870s. For her account of "The Middle Years" to 1930, she uses another 143 pages and covers the rest of the story to the 1990s in 70 pages. For the most part her brief footnotes identify quotations or key sources with occasional supplementary information. The "Note on Sources" is some two pages in length.

Schwieder has done an excellent job of updating Iowa's story and reflecting the changing emphases of the state's historians and of American historians in general.

Of the three major sections of the book the first shows perhaps the least deviation from the state of the historian's art during the 1960s. The second and concluding sections are much fresher, reflecting the enhanced interest of recent historians in women's history, and ethnic and sociocultural history. In place of Leland Sage's meticulous efforts to unlock the mysteries of backroom politics we find much greater emphasis on the contributions of women on the homesteads, farms, and in other work places and their efforts to enter the political arena, as well as additional attention given to the state's "cultural diversity," education, town and urban life. The focus of the book narrows somewhat in the final section where Schwieder places relatively heavy emphasis on boom and bust in the farm sector and state political issues, although, as she makes clear, controversies over the Equal Rights Amendment and school consolidation had their social implications.

Academic press directors love the book that falls in pagination between 300 and 400 pages in length. Given such constriction, it is difficult for the author of a state history to provide the amount of detail and explication that specialists would like. Schwieder's study of the Iowa coal industry contributed significantly to the state's economic history and her knowledge of this sector carries into *The Middle Land*. Her grasp of agricultural development and related farm machinery and processing industries is sure, as is her treatment of the development of the transportation system. But the reader also may wish for a bit more explanation to accompany description and suspect that there are some missing pieces. When Iowa's millionaires were listed in the early 1890s, for example, a significant number of them had made their fortunes in lumbering and milling. There is no hint of that here. Nor do we gain much knowledge of the financial infrastruc-

ture . . . the banks, other credit agencies, and insurance companies, that served the farms and businesses of the developing state. We do not find much in this book about Iowa authors, the state's popular culture, or the reasons why its universities justly enjoy national and international stature. But if there are omissions, Schwieder has also packed a great deal of relevant information into this book and the gaps in part emphasize the fact that a good many opportunities for illuminating research still remain in Iowa history.

Schwieder notes that earlier agricultural historians focussed attention primarily on the male farm operator. We should, she rightly maintains, pay more attention to the contributions of other members of the farm family. In discussing the contributions of other family members, she does, however, focus primarily on the farm wife's role. We must await further research before we can say much more about the contributions of the farm children, not only as sources of labor but as participants in family decision making. At one point Schwieder ventures briefly into farm bookkeeping, comparing the cash income derived from the farm enterprises of one farm wife with that derived from the activities of her husband. This is a tricky business . . . the butter churned and sold by a farm wife was the end product in chains of activity that involved the labor of cattle rearing and the production of livestock feed and forage, as well as milking and cream separation. The poultry enterprise, typically supervised by the farm wife, drew upon the grain supplies produced by the husband's field crops. Informative as her example

is, it may be subject to qualification on these grounds.

Faced with mountains of data, the authors of some state histories blur individual experience in narratives of unrelieved generalization. Schwieder avoids this trap by including many well chosen examples of individual or family experience on the farm, in the army, and in the factory.

Elsewhere Schwieder has argued that Iowa has "etched out a distinctive place for itself with its particular prairie environment, its reformist social nature, its political moderation and its agrarian stability." [1] In these and other respects, she concluded, Iowa was truly "a middle land." She has chosen to make this the central theme of her history of Iowa. Although we may suspect that "agrarian stability" has been somewhat less stable than the phrase suggests, the decision in general serves Schwieder's purpose well. This reviewer did, however, yearn a bit for more of the lapses from social decorum, the unexpected twists of local eccentricity, and surprising flashes of cosmopolitanism that he discovered in Iowa history and life during his years as a transplanted Hawkeye. Was Meredith Wilson completely fanciful when he described Iowans as "so by God stubborn we can stand touching noses for a year at a time and never see eye to eye"?

[1]. Dorothy Schwieder, "Iowa: The Middle Land," in James H. Madison, *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 294.

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