

**Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul**

By Mary Lethert Wingerd  
(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001. 326 p. Cloth, \$29.95.)

LIKE SO MANY NATIVE ST. PAULITES, when I'm away from home and hear myself introduced as being "from Minneapolis," I find myself muttering, "Actually, St. Paul." Which, of course, earns me an amused *whatever* look in New York or just about anywhere else. Mary Lethert Wingerd has written the book that explains why St. Paul people cling to our distinction. And why, given her history, this insistence is neither whimsical nor trivial.



Wingerd traces the curious and enduring parochialism of St. Paul from its taproot deep in rampant nineteenth-century capitalism and the "settling" of the north to the pitched battles of early- and midtwentieth-century labor relations in both Twin Cities. To this high drama she deftly attaches the fascinatingly intertwined subplot of the Catholic Church (make that the Irish Catholic Church). She presents a keen reading of its essential and still largely misunderstood role in the development of the city.

Even if you *think* you know what distinguishes the capital city from Minneapolis, what makes St. Paul different/better/stranger/more insular/more conservative/more "ethnic"—name your assumption—*Claiming the City* will assure you that you didn't know the half of it. The research here is meticulous, and the telling of the tale is riveting. Wingerd has so absorbed the detail of her research that she is not held captive to minutiae.

With the assurance of a writer entirely in possession of her materials, she moves from brilliant interpretative statements to winning vignette narratives, stitching her book together with a fine hand. She quotes from James J. Hill's wife's diary—but she also folds in a perfectly chosen quote from Mrs. Hill's maid. All of this keeps the story wonderfully alive for what Virginia Woolf called "the common reader," but it also reassures the history-hound of the soundness of the mind at work here.

As Wingerd notes in her excellent round-up epilogue, "Few present-day St. Paulites are familiar with the history of DFL politics, rooted in the vanished Farmer-Labor Party." Fewer still (I include myself) know the story of the assault on civil liberties by the Citizens Alliance and the truly scary Public Safety Commission in the early twentieth century, a history she lays out with admirable detachment. It is a chillingly eloquent cautionary tale in this post-9/11

world, for the charge of the commission included nothing less than the freedom to crush individuals and whole groups, often immigrants—but always under the benign call of "public safety," certainly the antique term for "national security."

This is an important book not only for its valuable reading of local history but also because of the intellectual foundation that sustains it. Wingerd believes in—and embodies powerfully—the importance of local history not as a limited exercise in local edification but as an essential aspect of cultural history that provides a lens impossible for larger-sweep histories. As she says so cogently, "Any one of hundreds of other towns and cities across America could be individually dismissed as economically irrelevant in the larger scheme of things. But it was in just such singly unimportant towns and cities that most Americans lived out their lives. The internal workings of these small and mid-sized local venues are centrally important to understanding the larger fabric of American politics and culture."

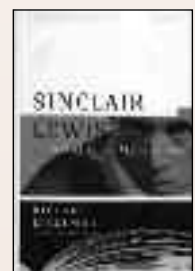
Though Wingerd is probably best described, on the basis of this work, as a labor historian, I found myself hoping her next book would be a biography—of James J. Hill? Of Archbishop Ireland? In any case, this first book launches a wonderful writer as well as an exemplary historian.

*Reviewed by Patricia Hampl, whose most recent book, I Could Tell You Stories, was a finalist for the 2000 National Book Critics Circle Award in General Nonfiction. She is Regents' Professor of English at the University of Minnesota.*

**Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street**

By Richard Lingeman  
(New York: Random House, 2002. 659 p. Cloth, \$35.00.)

SINCLAIR LEWIS HAS AT LAST found a biographer who can capture his extraordinary life. With driving energy, Lewis rose from small-town Minnesota to gain international prominence as a writer in the 1920s. In four novels (*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry*), he offered a startling view of America through a satirical lens tinted with sympathy. His career peaked in 1930 when he won the first Nobel Prize for literature ever awarded an American. Still determined to produce important fiction, he continued to write a book every two or three years until his death in 1951. He, his family, and his friends paid a price for the



intensity of his life, and his story is fascinating. Richard Lingeman's new biography tells that story well.

Lewis has not been treated so well before. The only other full-scale biography is Mark Schorer's 867-page *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, published in 1961. To his credit, Schorer investigated the subject exhaustively and amassed a mountain of facts. But he disliked Lewis and wrote as if struggling to account for a national embarrassment. Burdened by masses of material and tortured assessments of Lewis's failings, a reader finishes Schorer's book not with the sense of having met an extraordinary human being but with the sense of having been stuck on a coast-to-coast bus ride with an unpleasant seatmate.

Not so with Lingeman's portrayal, which explains better the sources of Lewis's achievement. A highlight has to do with Lewis's will to work, one of his greatest strengths. Determined to make a living with his typewriter, he forced himself to write for the popular market, garnering handsome returns for *Saturday Evening Post* short stories from 1915 to 1920. With *Main Street* in 1920, he took the big risk of affronting popular taste and, rather than relaxing when this paid off, he plunged into another original project (*Babbitt*, 1922), then another (*Arrowsmith*, 1925), and still another (*Elmer Gantry*, 1927), not to mention lesser works for additional income. Each major novel required travel for research, and so Lewis, who was restless anyway, rarely stayed in one place longer than ten months.

As Lingeman shows, Lewis's near-heroic devotion to work had conflicting effects. It allowed him to generate several distinctive novels and brought wealth, but it also led to some second-rate fiction, which hurt his reputation, and it strained family life. In his final ten years, the discipline of writing helped keep him away from drink, gave him the chance to add new themes to his observations on America, and earned him a lot of money. It may even have prolonged his life, but because writing had supplanted most other things of value, he had little else to hold on to at the end.

Equally revealing and sometimes equally poignant is the way the new biography accounts for other ironies in Lewis's life—his desire for a home *versus* his inability to settle in one place, his scorn for organized religion *versus* his search for spiritual value, his admiration of socialism *versus* his admiration of entrepreneurial success, his role as a wise-cracking prankster *versus* his earnest desire to find truth. These contradictions underlie Lingeman's captivating portrait of Lewis as a character and help explain why Lewis could write fiction with a complex point of view.

The new biography reads quickly. It has tight chapters. It elucidates Lewis's connection to his historical context and explains his economic and political leanings. It draws on the best scholarship in its criticism of the novels, and it makes good use of archival material, especially the George

Lorimer–Sinclair Lewis correspondence acquired in 1995 by the Minnesota Historical Society. Although the earlier biography by Mark Schorer with its myriad facts will still receive attention from scholars, Lingeman's book is unquestionably the new standard. It makes sense of Lewis, and it tells a better story.

*Reviewed by* George Killough, professor of English at the College of St. Scholastica, former president of the Sinclair Lewis Society, and editor of *Sinclair Lewis's Minnesota Diary 1942–46* (2000).

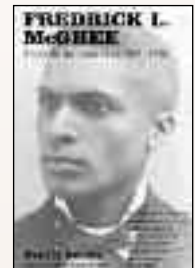
## Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912

By Paul D. Nelson  
(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002. 234 p. Cloth, \$29.95.)

THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE NORTH in civil rights history has been quietly overlooked. Over the last half-century the struggle in the South and other regions has been explored, but the activities of Minnesotans remain largely uncharted. The scarcity of material exposes two assumptions: that this territory contributed little to the ills of slavery and slavery's aftermath and that it contributed little good to the nation's civil rights movement.

Paul Nelson's book, *Fredrick L. McGhee*, begins to correct those misapprehensions. McGhee was the first African American attorney in Minnesota. His biography shows that Minnesotans, too, contended with pervasive race discrimination, even as life was safer here than in other parts of the country. Minnesotans, too, helped pave the nation's path toward greater equality for all citizens.

The story of McGhee, a solo-practice lawyer in St. Paul, is a colorful picture of lawyers' work in the days before computerized research, court-ordered exchanges of witness information, and social services for clients. Author Nelson, trained as a lawyer, describes several murder defenses in suspenseful detail, bringing to life McGhee's thorough preparation, canny strategies, eloquence, and occasional verbosity. McGhee defended white women and men as well as Black, gaining acquittals or convictions on lesser offenses through hard work and heart. He tracked down witnesses, convinced people to testify, found facts that would cast doubt on witnesses, and told stories that moved jurors and judges to rule in his favor.



McGhee also brought civil lawsuits—on a national level challenging railroad-car segregation and locally suing for discrimination by restaurants and landlords. Nelson describes turn-of-the-century Minnesota as a place of “informal segregation and uneasy toleration,” and he believes that litigation then did not significantly change conditions for African Americans. Still, it is clear that lawsuits’ assertions of legal rights were meaningful to the actors at the time. Lawsuits, even futile ones, helped the community hold on to the ideal of equality under law when that seemed an act of blind faith.

McGhee used his persuasive power in political organizations and on the dais, too. He helped found six civil rights organizations, some with his friend and close political colleague W. E. B. DuBois. The history of these groups is important in itself. McGhee, born a slave, was freed after the Civil War, but he soon saw other forms of subordination for African Americans evolve. The adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments (granting the end of slavery, due process and equal protection of laws, and the vote to all men) were only the beginning of needed changes. Lynchings and disenfranchisement of Black voters were increasing dramatically. The federal government rebuffed all pleas that it act to stop lynchings and to protect Black persons’ rights to vote and get an education, claiming that it could not interfere in the sovereign affairs of states.

So McGhee and his cohorts banded together to form civil rights organizations, from the American Law Enforcement League of Minnesota and the National Afro-American League, both begun in 1898, to the Niagara Movement of 1906. They aimed to gain enforcement of the laws by influencing politicians and public opinion. Nelson draws these groups as incubators that led to the 1909 birth in New York of the NAACP, probably the most important grassroots organization for social change in twentieth-century America.

The book is dense with facts gleaned from newspapers, government documents—court files, death certificates, census records—and other sources. Occasionally the data clouds the figure of McGhee the man. Yet McGhee is elusive for other reasons. He left no descendants after his daughter died, and none who knew him personally are alive. “Did he speak sharply to his wife, hector his daughter about boyfriends, or kick the dog?” There is no one to say. Nelson skillfully pieces bits of fact together for a portrait of a thoughtful and outspoken public activist for justice. This finely researched book gives a satisfying account of McGhee and his milieu, even as it leaves the reader with mysteries to ponder.

*Reviewed by Ann Juergens, a professor at William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul. Among other courses, Juergens teaches Civil Advocacy Clinic, where she and student attor-*

*neys represent poor clients in civil cases involving housing, employment, and consumer issues. She recently published an article on the first African American woman attorney in Minnesota, Lena Olive Smith.*

## The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History

Edited by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray  
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 251 p. Cloth, \$35.00.)

THIS COLLECTION ORIGINATED in a 1998 conference at Miami University of Ohio called “Writing Regionally: Historians Talk about the American Middle West.” That title is more accurate than the present one. The ten essays and editors’ introduction that make up this volume are less essays on regional history than ruminations about regional identity. What does it mean, each author asks, to write about something identified as the Midwest? How is history inflected regionally, or is it? What, if anything, is midwestern about the Middle West?



Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions vary considerably. Each of the authors is an academic historian who has published about a midwestern topic. Equally significant, all identify themselves as midwesterners, even if they currently live outside the region. Indeed, the operating assumption of the volume seems to be that only self-identified midwesterners would be interested in the topic. All of the essayists were invited “to consider the value of a self-conscious midwestern historiography” and to incorporate their own experiences as appropriate. The works that result operate at various scales—from the very particular to the general synthesis—but they share a kind of ambivalence about the meaning and the construction of midwestern identity that ultimately raises more questions than are answered.

Editors Cayton and Gray devote their introductory “Story of the Midwest” to explicating “the master narrative of the Midwest,” in which the early history of the Northwest Territory conferred on the area a heritage as the most American of regions, as well as a powerful economic and political role in national history. In their view, the long nineteenth century was the apogee of midwestern influence, while the twentieth-century literary “Revolt from the Village” marked a precipitous decline in midwestern prestige and influence. The master narrative “lost much of its relevance and energy” and became a Garrison Keillor parody, “a series of clichés and jokes about flatness and homogeneity.” The challenge for historians of midwestern

identity, they suggest, is to explain how the original narrative gained its power and why it now seems irrelevant.

One challenge they do not take on is definition. The location of the Midwest is never specified in this book, but a map confidently identifies “The midwestern Region of the United States” as including not only the traditional 12-state North Central Census District of Ohio through Kansas, but also Kentucky! While connoisseurs of regional identity frequently debate the fine points of whether Missouri is too southern or Ohio too eastern, many will be surprised that two of the ten essays deal in significant part with Kentucky. Some discussion of why this regional definition was adopted would have been welcome.

Minnesota readers will be particularly interested in Kathleen Neils Conzen’s essay, “Pi-ing the Type,” about an 1858 controversy involving St. Cloud newspaper editor Jane Grey Swisshelm. In this revisionist study of the incident in which the acerbic Swisshelm was the victim of an attack on her press, Conzen argues that neither feminism nor abolitionism was really at issue. Instead, the dispute was about competing visions of St. Cloud’s future. One, represented by Sylvanus Lowry, was Democratic in its politics and culturally pluralistic. It incorporated German Catholics along with métis trading families and sought to impose no single standard of morality. The other, represented by Swisshelm, was a far more restrictive vision of development, Republican in its politics, and exclusionary in its cultural vision.

While Swisshelm’s version may have triumphed to become the midwestern master narrative, Conzen suggests that it ultimately failed because there was no “regional plotline capable of lending imagined community to the full diversity of its people.”

Other essays take up related themes of actual midwestern diversity contrasted with imagined homogeneity. Mary Neth uses literature to explore gender differences in representations of the rural Midwest. Eric Hinderaker discusses the treatment of Indians in accounts about the Midwest, while Susan Gray explores complexities of one particular story, the autobiography of a part-Odawa Michigan woman, Etta Smith Wilson. Nicole Etcheson considers the pervasiveness of class and the complexity of race in the Midwest.

In terms of analyzing a midwestern master narrative, the two final essays—by R. Douglas Hurt, on “Midwestern Distinctiveness” and Jon Gjerde, on “Middleness and the Middle West”—come closest to meeting the challenge of the editors’ introduction. These historians move beyond the content of regional stories to consider the ways and the reasons that the stories have varied and evolved over time.

*Reviewed by C. Elizabeth Raymond, professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is co-author of a forthcoming book on mining landscapes, Changing Mines in America (2003), and is working on a study of midwestern regional identity.*

■ *Our readers write:* “Operation Save A Duck” in the Summer 2002 issue brought back many memories. . . . In the spring of 1962, I was a National Guard officer in the Hastings unit . . . in charge of logistics. I didn’t know what I was doing, but no one else did either.

“One day I bought all the rakes in Red Wing. The next day shovels. I . . . went to the NSP pole yard in St. Paul and bought most of their used wooden power poles [to use for booms].

“One of the better stories in a group of great stories is this: One Engineer platoon was working in the Weaver Bottoms down river. Noon lunch was two sandwiches, one apple, and one carton of milk in a paper bag, which was to be brought to them by helicopter. At the last minute a VIP (and we had dozens of them) commandeered the helicopter. What to do? . . . Why not take the L-19, a small two-seated high-wing observation aircraft, and air drop the lunches to the platoon? The lunches were put into gunnysacks and off the pilot went. . . . The platoon was found and was bombed with their lunches. End of story? Not in a long sight. . . . The platoon leader reported that all the milk cartons broke, soaking the sandwiches, and that the apples had been driven through each sandwich. Needless to say, no more air drops. . . .

“Did the operation accomplish anything? As the article says, not really. It did bring the public’s attention to pollution, which was only then starting to catch the public eye.

“Before the call-out of the wardens and National Guard, I spent several days collecting oiled ducks in the Spring Lake area north of the Hastings Dam. It wasn’t a pretty sight. The pile of ducks in the picture with the governor was hurriedly collected when we heard he was coming. Normally we left the dead ducks were we found them.

“Mr. Lee, Thanks for the memories.”  
—Ron Zastrow, Prescott, WI

■ The Solon J. Buck award for the best article published in *Minnesota History* during 2001 has been won by Steve Leikin, whose article “The Cooperative Coopers of Minneapolis” (Winter 2001—

02) analyzed the successes and ultimate failure of a radical workplace experiment in the barrel business. Dr. Leikin is a lecturer in U.S. history at San Francisco State University.

The Theodore C. Blegen Award for the best article by a Minnesota Historical Society staff member goes to Patty Dean, supervisory curator for museum collections. Her article “It Is Here We Live’: Minneapolis Homes and the Arts and Crafts Movement” (Spring 2001) examined some Mill City manifestations—of the grand to the humble—of this international design movement.

This year’s judges were Mary Wingerd, assistant professor of history at Macalester College, St. Paul, and Tim Hoogland, coordinator of education outreach programs for the Minnesota Historical Society. Each award includes a prize of \$600.

■ John Graham Cook’s article, “Artist Henry Lewis: The Case of the Falsified Resumé,” published in the Spring 2001 issue of this magazine, has won first place in the Excellence-in-Writing contest sponsored by the International Society of Family History Writers and Editors. Cook, who lives in Massachusetts, used naturalization and census records, letters, and papers in various archives to set straight the record on the famous artist’s citizenship and possible motives for deception about it.

■ Visit *Minnesota History’s* new web pages within the Society’s website: [www.mnhs.org/market/mhspress/mnhistory.html](http://www.mnhs.org/market/mhspress/mnhistory.html). These frequently updated pages have the latest information about current and back issues of the magazine, purchasing issues, subscriptions and memberships, publication prizes, and author guidelines.

■ *American Towns: An Interpretive History* by David J. Russo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001, 350 p., cloth, \$28.95) is a fresh look at the ways in which small towns filled rural Americans’ economic, political, social, and cultural needs for community. While Russo does not examine the Minnesota experience specifically, he describes how towns came into existence, grew or

declined, gave way to larger urban areas, and finally “have reappeared in idealized forms that provide Americans with nostalgia for a past that most of them did not even experience.” Russo understands how intimacy and neighborliness traveled side-by-side with intolerance and narrow-mindedness. Particularly interesting discussions focus on communal social life and recreation.

■ Letters to, letters from. Sigurd Christian Ylvisaker’s *Letters from Leipzig to his Family in Minnesota, 1907–1910* (Mankato: Bethany Lutheran College, 2000, 396 p., paper, \$14.95) describes life in Leipzig, the great university itself, church activities, and summering in Norway. The son of a prominent Lutheran clergy family, the letter writer reveals something about the inner workings of this tightly knit Norwegian American, urban, Minnesota family. (Order from the college bookstore at 700 Luther Drive, Mankato 56001; include \$4.95 for postage and handling.)

Another group of family communications is collected in *America-America Letters: A Norwegian-American Family Correspondence*, edited by Bjørn Gunnar Østgård (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2001, 161 p., cloth, \$24.95). Included are selected private letters sent by descendants of immigrants Knud and Mari Aaker to each other in the new country between 1847 and 1894. Unlike “America letters” urging friends and family back home to emigrate, these reveal more candid assessments of life in the new land. (Order from the Association at 1510 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield 55057; include \$3.00 for postage and handling plus \$1.63 sales tax.)

■ Weaving together strands of Indian history, educational history, family history, and child-welfare policy, Marilyn Irvin Holt examines the establishment, function, effects, and eventual fate of a culturally unusual institution in *Indian Orphanages* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001, 326 p., cloth, \$34.95). Noting the social and economic pressures that caused Indian people to accept the concept of orphanages, Holt looks closely

at a number of institutions from the 1850s to 1940s, including the Ojibwe-Dakota orphanage in South Dakota.

■ The James J. Hill Library will award a number of grants of up to \$2,000 to support research in the James J. Hill, Louis W. Hill, and Reed/Hyde papers. Among them, these collections contain material on family history and social, cultural, and economic activities from the 1850s to 1960. The deadline for applications is November 1, 2002. For more information contact W. Thomas White 651-265-5441 or [twhite@jjhill.org](mailto:twhite@jjhill.org).

■ Women's history, American history, and local history gracefully merge in Barbara Stuhler's newest book, *A Bond of Learning: Changing Times and the New Century Club of St. Paul, 1887-2000*. Begun

strictly for the "intellectual and cultural development" of its upper- and middle-class female members, the club, like many of its contemporaries across the country, proved to be a training ground for leadership roles at a time when the public arena began to accept women. Historian Stuhler grounds the details of New Century Club's programs, speakers, and meetings in the larger picture of the club movement and the social, cultural, and political issues of the organization's 100-plus years. Quotes from the history-minded club's own records round out this well-balanced book. Although it is not for sale, copies are in the Minnesota Historical Society and other libraries.

■ Minnesota companies and scientists played a major role in a medical breakthrough of the twentieth century, a story

chronicled in Kirk Jeffrey's *Machines in Our Hearts: The Cardiac Pacemaker, the Implantable Defibrillator, and American Health Care* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 370 p., cloth, \$48.00). The book traces both the development of knowledge about regulating the human heartbeat and the development of companies that produced the new "smart machines," while profiling pioneering heart surgeons, engineers, medical-research personnel, and the businessmen who built a multimillion-dollar industry. It also looks at the sticky issue of available versus affordable health care.

■ Renowned environmentalist Sigurd F. Olson was a prolific writer and public speaker whose popular books remain in print. Now editor and biographer David Backes has drawn together a collection of 18 lesser-known magazine articles and speeches, some previously unpublished, in *The Meaning of Wilderness, Essential Articles and Speeches* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 185 p., cloth, \$24.95). Written between 1928 and 1973, these pieces illustrate the evolution of Olson's wilderness philosophy.

■ Between 1943 and 1945, Minnesota was home to 21 prisoner-of-war camps holding German and Italian soldiers captured in North Africa and Europe. Known as branch camps, Minnesota's compounds were extensions of base camps established close to areas experiencing labor shortages. In *Swords into Plowshares: Minnesota's POW Camps during World War II* (St. Paul: Cathedral Hill Books, 2000, 235 p., paper, \$17.00), Dean B. Simmons ably sets the stories of the Minnesota camps into the larger picture of the war years in the United States and the Geneva Convention regulations governing the treatment of prisoners. The book documents the layout, accommodations, and missions of the Minnesota camps, whose prisoners worked in agriculture, canning, and logging and forestry. Through diligent research and recent interviews in Germany and the U.S., author Simmons captures the voices and experiences of prisoners, adding an important and very readable dimension to this little-known chapter in Minnesota history.

## MINNESOTA HISTORY

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