

HAMLIN GARLAND, OCCASIONAL MINNESOTAN

IN THE SPRING of 1939 I had the pleasure of conversing with Hamlin Garland on the terrace of his home on De Mille Drive, Hollywood. Garland then seemed in good health, a short but stocky man with a white mane of hair and stubby fingers. His garrulousness, his accurate memory for details belonging to another century, and his physical energy belied his seventy-eight years. Our conversation ran naturally to books, to his experiences in the Middle West, to his meetings with western writers like Joseph Kirkland and Edward Eggleston, and to his own ideals as a novelist. He remarked that he could not stomach the fiction of John Steinbeck, nor the work of any writer who limited himself to the evil and ugly aspects of life. To him, the novelist who wrote of nothing but the seamy and the revolting was guilty of gross distortion. He admitted that of late years his interest had gradually narrowed and that it was now focused largely on spiritualism. When I left him I carried away with me the impression of an old man who realized that it was time to take in sail, but who still believed his earlier credo and who was unashamed of his life or his work. A year later Hamlin Garland was dead.

Thus departed the man who became known as the type-symbol of the pioneer in American literature, the dirt farmer who for a time moved westward with his emigrant family but eventually chose to become a back-trailer and created the literary Middle Border. In Garland's chronicles the Middle Border means the four states that bound Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas. Yet the term is much more inclusive than this simple geographical definition. Like the phrase "the frontier," it can be explained or interpreted in

a multiplicity of ways. Even in Garland's own books the Middle Border is richly connotative; it suggests not merely a periphery of settlement nor a strip of farm land confronting the prairie, but a large, amorphous area in which the settlers are restless, ever turning their eyes westward, in which the population is polyglot and unstable, speculating in land like the family of Herbert Quick, groping in a half-blind way for education and culture, practicing democracy in society and government and religion.¹ Geographically the Middle Border is still a useful term; chronologically it is obsolete.

Hamlin Garland was never for long a resident of Minnesota. His restless family never attempted to operate a Minnesota farm. Yet the westward migrations of the Garlands followed the rim of the state so that the Minnesota bluffs and prairies were seldom far beyond the horizon. From their homes in Winneshiek and Mitchell counties, Iowa, the Garland children could easily ride northward across the border. As Hamlin Garland himself declared long afterward, "In my boy-hood it [*Minnesota*] was a strange wild country of Big Woods, the home of panthers, bears and Indians. Without doubt the stories my father told of it form a part of the substratum on which much of my earlier fiction is based."² In his early maturity Garland visited Minnesota frequently, occasionally as an advocate of Henry George's single-tax theory and of Populism, and later as a lecturer. The friends of his adult years included Cordenio Severance, lawyer, and Richard Burton, late professor of English in the University of Minnesota.

Hamlin Garland was born in 1860, and spent the early years of his boyhood on a farm in Green's Coulee in western Wisconsin not far from La Crosse. On occasional visits to the post office at Onalaska, the boy discovered the Missis-

¹ Herbert Quick's *One Man's Life* (Indianapolis, 1925) gives a vivid picture of an Iowa pioneer family which suffered from western land fever.

² Personal letter from Garland to the writer, February 25, 1938.

issippi River and the bluffs of Minnesota beyond, for him and especially for his adventurous father the beckoning gateway to the West. Garland later remarked that these Minnesota hills "were mysterious and majestic features in a land bounded only by the sunset."³ The elder Garland had crossed the great river before the Civil War and remembered fondly the fertile grassy prairies which contrasted so sharply with the tilted and eroded farms of the Wisconsin coulees. Thus, when a La Crosse merchant in 1868 offered to buy the farm, he could not resist the temptation to sell out and move westward. The refrain of a marching song pelted his ears:

Then o'er the hills in legions, boys,
Fair freedom's star
Points to the sunset regions, boys,
Ha, ha, ha-ha!⁴

In this way the Garland family began that series of migratory jumps from farm to farm which terminated only in what was then Dakota Territory.

To reach their first destination, Iowa, the Garlands traversed Houston County, Minnesota, crossing the Mississippi at La Crescent, lodging for the night at Hokah, pausing again at Caledonia, and finally entering Winneshiek County, Iowa, and stopping on a farm near Hesper. But even this remove did not satisfy the pioneer desire for change. Within a few months the Garlands had substituted a farm at Burr-oak for the one near Hesper, and some time later they migrated to Osage in Mitchell County.

The period spent in Osage was important, for it was there that Hamlin Garland had the opportunity to attend school at the Cedar Valley Seminary. He finished the four-year course in 1881, excelling in declamation and oratory and

³Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 12, 27 (New York, 1923); Garland to the writer, February 25, 1938.

⁴*A Son of the Middle Border*, 45.

preparing himself for schoolteaching. In one of his earliest novels, *A Spoil of Office*, Garland pictured such an academy in the corn country as he himself had attended and sketched the earnest students and the mortifications brought on by ignorance. The callow farm laborer avidly seeking an education who is the protagonist, Bradley Talcott, is in more than one respect reminiscent of his creator.

Following graduation Garland vainly attempted to find a school which would welcome his untried abilities. He himself has narrated his experiences in the summer and fall of 1881, when he wandered through Minnesota in search of work at Faribault, Farmington, Chaska, Granite Falls. At Faribault he stood beside the "Cannonball River," as he designated the Cannon, and thought of his predecessor, Edward Eggleston, who as a young man had also come to Minnesota and had written a novel about his new environment, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*. No doubt Garland's own Boomtown of later years owed something to Eggleston's picture of land speculation on the frontier. But while Hamlin Garland was thus striving to profit financially from his course at the Cedar Valley Seminary, Richard Garland, obsessed with the idea that richer land lay where the sun set, had determined to make one more move westward; and soon the son followed his family to the new homestead near Ordway in what is now South Dakota, traveling the last twelve miles from Aberdeen on foot.⁹

His first visit to Dakota Territory was of short duration. After a fortnight's work shingling a double house, the twenty-one year old Garland, consciously proud of his legal maturity, gathered up his wages and headed eastward. At Hastings he was tempted by the river packets, so that when the "War Eagle" arrived from St. Paul he bought passage for Red Wing, the picturesque strip of water impressing him somewhat as the Nile impresses the traveler at Cairo. Red Wing

⁹ South Dakota Writers' League, *Hamlin Garland Memorial*, 10 (Mitchell, South Dakota, 1939); *A Son of the Middle Border*, 243.

to him was an exciting town, and he described the bluffs surrounding it in terms that he later applied to the peaks of Wyoming. But unfortunately his money did not allow an extended stay to appreciate the scenery, and shortly he departed for Wabasha and then for the hamlet of Byron, where his mother's relatives lived. Again a search for a school was futile. Garland remained until December on the farm of William Harris, plowing, threshing, and husking, but at the end of 1881 he left Olmsted County to revisit Onalaska and the scenes of his boyhood. Well over a year later, after an interval of carpentry and schoolteaching, Garland again traversed Minnesota en route to the family homestead near Ordway.⁹

For some time thereafter he remained at least nominally a Dakotan, pre-empting a claim in McPherson County, enduring the vicious prairie winter in a frail shanty, and earning more money at manual labor than at teaching. Then in the fall of 1884 he mortgaged his claim for two hundred dollars and started for Boston, determined to carve out a career for himself away from the privations of prairie farming. It was in Boston that he fitted himself for the dual work of writing and lecturing that allowed him to return to the Middle Border as a successful man of letters.

For the next fifty years Garland made frequent visits to the Middle West, to see his parents who clung to the Ordway farm for some years longer, to observe agrarian discontent for B. O. Flower's *Arena*, or to speak to various audiences on political or literary topics. On numerous occasions he came to Minnesota, particularly to Worthington, where his mother's sister resided and where his grandfather, Hugh McClintock, spent his declining years, to Winona, and to the Twin Cities. Several times in the early 1890's he spoke in the state in an attempt to convert Minnesotans to the support of Henry George's single-tax doctrine or as an

⁹*A Son of the Middle Border*, 249-255; Garland, *Roadside Meetings*, 1-4 (London, 1931); *Hamlin Garland Memorial*, 12-15.

earnest advocate of Populism.⁷ The *St. Paul Daily Globe* for January 1, 1891, announced Garland's arrival on one of these visits and outlined his engagements.

Prof. Hamlin Garland, of the Boston School of Oratory, is visiting Minneapolis, and while here will read his famous play, *Under the Wheel*, and deliver several addresses. At the Unitarian church on Friday evening next this week *Under the Wheel* will be read. On Sunday evening next Prof. Garland will address Mr. Sample's congregation in All Souls church on the East Side, and on Wednesday evening of next week he will address the Single Tax League at Labor Temple on "The Third House." The public generally is invited to all these entertainments.

According to the *Minneapolis Tribune* for January 6, the title of Garland's address at Labor Temple was changed to "How the People's Franchises are Stolen"! In 1891, however, Garland was still young and relatively unknown, so that probably none of these speeches attracted much attention.

It was a different matter when Garland was invited to speak at the national convention of Populists at Omaha in 1892. There had assembled the lean, hollow-eyed farm wives and the bitter, militant, exacerbated farmers who fill the pages of Garland's better stories. "Before this whispering, restless, respectably threadbare throng, young Mr. Garland rose to read a story which he called 'Under the Lion's Paw.' The horrors of farm debt hung over many in the audience; they *knew*."⁸

The decade of the 1890's brought fame and recognition to Garland. It was the period of *Main Travelled Roads* and *Rose of Dutcher's Colly*, of numerous articles in national magazines, and of successful lecture tours. Consequently, when Garland returned to Minneapolis in the winter of 1900 he was received as a distinguished man of letters. The *Min-*

⁷ For Garland's political beliefs at this time see his articles in the *Arena* (Boston), notably the following: "A New Declaration of Rights," 3: 157-184 (January, 1891); "The Single Tax in Actual Application," 10: 52-58 (June, 1894); and "The Land Question, and Its Relation to Art and Literature," 9: 165-175 (January, 1894).

⁸ George R. Leighton, "Omaha, Nebraska," in *Harper's Magazine*, 177: 128 (July, 1938).

neapolis Journal for February 14 announced his lecture on "Tales of the Trail" at the Lyceum Theater on February 21, printed a biographical sketch, and hailed him as in every way a western man. It referred to Garland's literary theory that a man's subjects should be chosen from his immediate surroundings and it praised him most highly as a writer of short stories. Moreover, the paper remarked that Garland had inherited sturdy ideals from his Scotch Presbyterian forebears and that a life of hard work and privation on the farm had developed his natural bent as a reformer.

In subsequent issues the *Journal* kept Garland's name before the public. He was described as a new form of local colorist, as an intimate student of the upper Mississippi Valley and of the frontier in Dakota, as a poet and historian, as an authority on U. S. Grant—Garland had recently finished a biography of the great general. "He was and has remained a realist of the strong, healthy type—not the naturalist of morbidity." Again, Garland was pictured as a veritist, one who faithfully followed his literary creed and who, despite criticism, was widely read and admired. In its last preliminary announcement of Garland's lecture, the *Journal* eulogized the speaker not only as a student and lover of the western country but as a distinguished orator.⁹

At the Lyceum Theater on February 21 Garland was introduced by Richard Burton. His lecture was apparently very successful, and he was praised for his sincere interpretation of outdoor life.

As an original recital, his discourse with the spirit of freedom and unconventionality it involved, was of a very pleasing character, and his audience found great enjoyment in following him. He described a condition of nature and civilization peculiar to the Western country, and the fact that it is rapidly being superseded, lends individual interest to the literature that concerns it. Mr. Garland is a natural lover of the Western life and has reveled in his study of its phases.¹⁰

⁹ *Minneapolis Journal*, February 17, 19, 20, 1900.

¹⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 22, 1900. The *Journal* for the same date alluded to Garland's poetic treatment of his theme.

Professor Burton became one of Garland's warmest friends. From 1906 to 1925 head of the English department at the University of Minnesota, Burton was generally liked and esteemed. Garland especially had high respect for Burton's genial scholarship. He compared him to Professor William Lyon Phelps of Yale for his ability to interest and at the same time to educate his students, and he pronounced the two men as outstanding among American lecturers on literary themes.¹¹

But no Minnesotans were closer to Hamlin Garland than Cordenio and Maidie Severance, whose intimacy he valued highly and whose home he praised for its opulence and luxury. The Severances had bought the old Harriman farm near Cottage Grove and had added wings and ells to the house until it was transformed into a veritable rural mansion, complete with pipe organ and picture gallery. In *Companions of the Trail* Garland recounts how the Severances had descended upon him in 1906 while he was at work on a novel in West Salem, Wisconsin, and how they had given him his first ride in an automobile, an adventurous, bumpy excursion along the Minnesota bluffs. Four years later he enjoyed the hospitality of the Severances at their baronial farm. It was during this visit that he occupied a box at the St. Paul Auditorium with Charles Flandrau while Theodore Roosevelt addressed the audience, and probably Garland was also a guest at the dinner which Colonel Alexander O. Brodie gave at the St. Paul Hotel in honor of the ex-president. On many later occasions Garland was entertained by the Severances; it is doubtful, indeed, if he ever passed through the Twin Cities without visiting Cedarhurst, Cottage Grove.¹²

In the years preceding his California retirement Garland

¹¹ Garland, *Companions of the Trail*, 422 (New York, 1931).

¹² Garland, *Companions of the Trail*, 312. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for September 7, 1910, states that Cordenio Severance and Frank B. Kellogg were among Brodie's guests, but makes no mention of Garland. On November 13, 1923, the Severances entertained Garland at a luncheon at the Minnesota Club. See *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 15, 1923.

was an inveterate lecturer and even something of a cosmopolitan. His many tours sent him up and down the country, so that he became as well known as the great lyceum speakers of the past. To trace these tours would be both difficult and fruitless, since Garland became so familiar a figure that editors no longer considered his appearance as news. But if one may select a single series of lectures as having special importance, it must be that of 1923, for it was then that Garland returned to the Middle West after a long absence only to realize that some of his earlier impressions were unpleasantly accurate. After speaking at various places, including Valley City, North Dakota, on November 14 and Albert Lea, Minnesota, on November 19, Garland asserted that his observations had softened his original resentment at Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*. "I here confess with sorrow that this tour has been a painful revelation of the ugliness, crudity and monotony which still characterizes most of our Mid-West homes. . . . Everywhere I went, I saw neglected gardens, unhoused machinery, heaps of garbage, weedy fields and boxlike graceless homes. These are my outstanding memories."¹³ It should be pointed out, of course, that this re-introduction to the West occurred after the publication of *A Son of the Middle Border*, not only his most famous book but the book which marked Garland's return to the authentic realism of his earlier writings.

Perhaps a more pleasant memory to Garland in later years was a convocation address at the University of Minnesota on May 24, 1928, when he spoke on the topic, "The Westward March of the Pioneer." In the afternoon he was en-

¹³ Hamlin Garland, *Afternoon Neighbors*, 129 (New York, 1934). The lecture at Albert Lea is reported in the *Albert Lea Tribune* for November 20, 1923. The account states that Garland read his address, and observes that neither his delivery nor his lecture was anything to become excited about. In fact, the paper concludes, Garland was hardly equal as an entertainer to the "high class talent" which went to Albert Lea in those days! Garland also spoke at Hamline University in St. Paul at chapel exercises on November 19, choosing the subject "Two Summers in England." *Pioneer Press*, November 20, 1923.

tertained at tea by Dean and Mrs. Melvin E. Haggerty, and in the evening he was the principal speaker at the annual banquet of the college of education held in the Minnesota Union. Choosing the subject "Getting a Start," Garland stressed such essential pioneer qualities as self-reliance, independence, and the desire to establish a home.¹⁴

The fact that Hamlin Garland never lived in Minnesota for any length of time may explain his failure to use the state as a locale for his more important work. It is significant that when he chose to describe a Middle Border farm hand or a western boom town, his prototypes were an Iowa laborer and a Dakota village. Yet he knew Minnesota not only from personal experience but vicariously from the adventures of his father. He had traveled across it; he had talked with its people. Moreover, he recognized its literary possibilities. In that little-known but stimulating plea for literary regionalism, *Crumbling Idols*, Garland asserted that "themes are crying out to be written," notably northern lumbering. He observed that novelists did not need to look far for suitable material, that the life in sawmills and shingle mills, the vicissitudes of the river, and specifically the changes engendered by the rise of cities like St. Paul and Minneapolis offered interesting potential themes.¹⁵ And he pleaded passionately for veritism, his neologism for sincere, blunt, and penetrating expression of what the writer saw.

The actual appearance of Minnesota material in Garland's books is infrequent. One of the stories in *Main Traveled Roads*, "A Day's Pleasure," was suggested by a visit to Worthington in 1891.¹⁶ Unhappily, the theme of

¹⁴ Garland's convocation fee was a hundred dollars. An editorial in the *Minnesota Daily*, the campus newspaper, rebuking students for their discourtesies to convocation speakers, suggests that Garland's speech was not too well received. *Minnesota Daily*, May 24, 25, 1928; *Tribune*, May 24, 25, 1928.

¹⁵ Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, 14, 21 (Chicago, 1894). Compare an article entitled "The West in Literature" in the *Arena*, 6: 669-676 (November, 1892).

¹⁶ Garland to the writer, February 25, 1938.

the story, although thus localized in Minnesota, is characteristic of many a farming community of the Middle West. Scarcely a village but knows women like Mrs. Markham, gaunt, work-tired farm wives, to whom a monthly visit to the nearest shopping center is "a day's pleasure." The romantic hero of *Jason Edwards*, Garland's crude novel of poverty in the Boston slums and on the Dakota prairies, traverses Minnesota en route to Boomtown to meet his fiancee.¹⁷ Allusions to Minnesota are scattered throughout Garland's best-known book, *A Son of the Middle Border*, including wistful glances westward across the level uplands, scenes of cornhusking on an Olmsted County farm, and fruitless attempts to find a rural school. A chapter in *Trail-Makers of the Middle Border*, a thinly veiled picture of Richard Garland's life, gives an idyllic glimpse of Minnesota soil before the Civil War and of an attempt at homesteading which was frustrated by federal troops acting to prevent Sioux depredations on the squatters. Garland himself admitted that a handful of tales and poems was also the result of Minnesota observations or episodes.¹⁸ As a whole, it cannot be said that Garland's work was greatly shaped or stimulated by his Minnesota experiences.

Nevertheless, Minnesota is intrinsically part of the Middle Border, and Minnesota was the land that Hamlin Garland saw when his boyish dreams pictured fabulously fertile soil and pampas inhabited by Indians and deer and buffalo. If Richard Garland's path westward had been straight as the crow flies, he would have crossed Minnesota rather than Iowa en route to his Dakota paradise, much as the pilgrims of *Giants in the Earth* toiled through Fairmont and Worthington and Luverne — or their embryos. And if Hamlin Garland had lived out his life as poetic destiny would seem to have outlined it, he would have died in a big log house on one of the Minnesota bluffs overlooking La Crosse. But

¹⁷ Garland, *Jason Edwards: An Average Man*, 118 (New York, 1897).

¹⁸ Garland to the writer, February 25, 1938.

as he himself remarked to the writer, he felt unable any longer to endure the isolation and rigor of a northern winter, and instead of surveying the great Mississippi in his waning years he was "doomed" to finish his life "in a Monterey Colonial house in a city of perpetual sun and perennial flowers."

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