Mr. Randel, who is a member of the English faculty in Florida State University at Tallahassee, is the author of the only full-length biography of the Hoosier realist, Edward Eggleston (1946).

Edward Eggleston's
MINNESOTA FICTION

WILLIAM PEIRCE RANDEL

THE TEN YEARS that Edward Eggleston, famed as the author of the Hoosier School-Master, spent in Minnesota, from 1856 to 1866, were important formative years for both the young realist and the even younger state. It is no more than a coincidence that he came of age the same year Minnesota won statehood. To claim for him a major role in shaping Minnesota's destiny would be absurd. But an author, like a historian (and Eggleston was both), has the special function of capturing in words the human experience of time and place. Eggleston owed Minnesota more than Minnesota owes him; yet the very lack of an outstanding literary record for the heroic decade he spent in the state gives his assorted Minnesota writings a certain priority.

When Eggleston arrived in Minnesota in the late spring of 1856, a sickly youth of eighteen, he was already a fairly complex individual. Two strong inner drives, religious and literary, were battling for ascendency, and his health was the principal victim. A strict personal regimen of early rising, inadequate food and sleep, enforced study, and endless soul-searching reduced his resistance and made him easy prey for respiratory disorders. The trip west from Indiana was an act of desperation: private expectation of an early death was only in part offset by hope that the official propaganda was right and that Minnesota air was good for consumptives. It probably was not the air that cured him but the challenge of new conditions, the frontier excitement and optimism, the strenuous outdoor living. His gloom lightened, and never again was he quite as pessimistic. What is perhaps more significant, the success he won as a Methodist preacher gave him a degree of self-respect he had sorely needed. At Winona, his final pastorate, he earned one of the top salaries in the Minnesota conference of the Methodist church, and he was highly regarded by both his parishioners and his colleagues.

His rapid progress as a clergyman was not without interruptions, for recurring illness forced him sometimes into superannuation, a Methodist term that seems hardly appropriate when applied to a youth in his early twenties. These periods of temporary retirement permitted a variety of activity that he later drew upon for literary purposes. He made soap, sold subscription books and life insurance, organized the St. Paul Library Association, out of which grew the...
EDWARD Eggleston about 1860

AS A PREACHER Eggleston developed a particular skill in speaking to children; he could delight them and hold their interest without ever condescending to their immaturity. This reputation led to his editorship, from 1866 to 1870, of the National Sunday School Teacher (Chicago) and to lectures and articles and books about the Sunday school; for a time, to his private amusement, he was hailed as a leading authority on the subject.

Even earlier, his success with children provided his first opportunity for regular writing. During part of 1865 he served as Minnesota agent for the North-West Sanitary Fair, which was staged that May in Chicago. Through his brother-in-law, William Goodsmith, business manager of the fair, he met Alfred Sewall of Chicago, whose fertile and visionary mind hatched a scheme for a children's magazine, the Little Corporal. It became the first Chicago periodical with a national reputation and the pioneering predecessor of St. Nicholas and the Youth's Companion. Sewall asked Eggleston to contribute, and he did, sometimes writing almost the entire monthly issue—jokes, rebuses, poems, conundrums, and stories. Between August, 1865, and the end of 1866 he wrote for the Little Corporal fourteen stories about the Indians of Minnesota, fitting them into a framework of narrator and individualized listeners: Bessee, Sunbeam, and Chicken Little (Eggleston's three daughters), and three young friends, George, Captain John, and Willie (the "Professor of Geography").

These stories, slanted though they are for young readers, contain a treasure of Indian lore, both factual and legendary, that has seldom been assembled with such clarity. The Rollo books had taught Eggleston, as a boy, to observe carefully and report exactly, and he refused now to romanticize what he had seen and heard of the Sioux and the Chippewa. He had met some of the Indians he described; the stories about others were from reliable sources, including George Northrup, the frontier scout.
Longfellow, in far-distant Cambridge, might glorify the "noble savage" he had never seen; not so Eggleston, whose knowledge of the "wild and brutal savages," as he called them in one story, had been firsthand or nearly so. These stories, though products of a literary apprentice, cannot be summarily dismissed; they reveal the same unerring authenticity, the same reliance upon the literal truth that later made the *Hoosier School-Master* the file-leader in Midwestern realism.

THOUGH HE WAS a successful writer for children, Eggleston was not that alone. As early as 1860 he delighted adult readers with a series of five letters to a St. Paul newspaper describing what he saw on a trip to Winnipeg. Three scientists, Simon Newcomb, William Ferrel, and Samuel Scudder, all of whom won subsequent fame, were sent from the East by the government to observe a total eclipse of the sun in Saskatchewan. They stopped briefly in St. Paul, and Eggleston, fired by curiosity and the chance to escape the humdrum duties of his impoverished and lethargic Market Street Church, asked if he might go along. His congregation's temporary loss was our gain, for the reports sent from overnight stopping places are as good a contemporary record as one might wish for. Cold logic tells us that such a modern city as St. Cloud must once have been a raw frontier town, and that primitive roads and vehicles must have taxed the courage and stamina of strong men; the letters provide the confirming evidence of warm personal narrative. Eggleston later reworked some of this material into two articles which have never been published—"Red River of the North in 1860" and "Ten Days in the Selkirk Settlement."

In 1862, while he was pastor of St. Paul's fashionable Jackson Street Church, Eggleston had the melancholy duty of conducting funerals for several victims of the Sioux Outbreak. He would have liked an active part in the grim task of suppressing the Sioux, but his offer to serve as chaplain of one of the hastily recruited regiments was turned down by the commanding general, William R. Marshall, a future governor of Minnesota. After the fighting was ended, Eggleston considered writing a history of the outbreak and even broached the idea to a publisher, but nothing came of it; his experience was probably as yet insufficient for so formidable a project. But he did write two articles: "An Incident of the Indian Massacres of 1862," which appeared in the *Ladies' Repository* in December, 1864, and "The Siege of Fort Ridgely," which survives only in manuscript.

In his first and best-known novel, the *Hoosier School-Master* (1871), Eggleston put to good use the dialect he had heard on visits to the remote hill country of south-
ern Indiana, a region much more retarded than the Ohio River towns of Vevay and Madison, where he spent his boyhood. The novel was not, however, his first experiment with dialect. That can be traced back to 1864, when as a Minnesota resident Eggleston contributed to the issue of the St. Paul Press for August 24 a letter signed by a fictitious Hoosier, "Zoroaster Higgins."

It was addressed to Brigadier General Willis A. Gorman of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, who had recently given an address at Ingersoll Hall endorsing the presidential aspirations of General George B. McClellan, the Democratic candidate. A strong Lincoln supporter, Eggleston adopted the device of a pseudonymic letter in dialect to ridicule both Gorman's speech and the political ambition behind it. To a few close friends, however, Eggleston confided the secret of Higgins' identity. Among those who knew that this was a pen name adopted by a Methodist preacher to conceal his authorship of an impertinent letter was Thomas Simpson of Winona. A few days after its appearance, Simpson commented in a letter to Eggleston: "'Zoroaster Higgins' is a brick, better than Artemus Ward. So says my wife." Although Higgins reappeared in 1871 as the author of a series of farcical poems in Hearth and Home, of which Eggleston was then editor, it was not until the Eggleston Papers in the collection of Regional History at Cornell University were carefully examined that the secret of the fictitious Hoosier's identity was laid bare.

ONLY ONE of Eggleston's novels, the Mystery of Metropolisville (1873), has a Minnesota setting. Its hero is an idealistic youth, Albert Charlton, who accepts the blame for his mother's thefts from the United States mail and serves a term in Stillwater. The plot is less important, however, than the background story of a typical boom town that collapsed when the depression of 1857 wiped out its spurious prosperity. Real-estate booms were common enough in those days of unchecked optimism, but Eggleston was thinking of Cannon City, where he had spent his first weeks in Minnesota. The choice was a good one, better even than Eggleston could have known, for Cannon City never recovered from its catastrophe and stands today, a mere handful of buildings, as a mute witness to the devastating power of economic laws. The novel is seldom read today except by students of American culture. At least one of its characters, however, Mr. Plausaby, the loan shark, has gained a niche in the hall of infamy, for the chapter entitled "Corner Lots" has found its way into several anthologies of American literature. The homely verses of the Hoosier poet George Gray, a minor character, are further evidence of Eggleston's interest in dialect. Although modern readers are certain to be disappointed in this book as a novel, historical-minded Minnesotans will find in it many a rich reminder of their past.

One of the weirdest stories ever written about Minnesota is Eggleston's "The Gunpowder Plot," published in Scribner's Monthly for July, 1871. If it were merely fantastic it would merit no attention here, but it provides an accurate if not too pleasant picture of life in a frontier "town" of a single house and two inhabitants, supposedly in Stevens County. If the modern reader is unconvinced, as may easily be the case, let him recall the truism that truth is stranger than fiction and consider the first sentence in Eggleston's preface to the Circuit Rider: "Whatever is incredible in this story is true." No one, of course, is bound to take the hilarious climax of "The Gunpowder Plot" at its face value; even a realist must be granted some leeway for imagination.

---

4 See Mrs. O. F. Huxman, "Interesting Points Regarding the Early History of Stevens County," in the Morris Tribune, November 21, 1924. The writer vouches for the relation of Eggleston's tale to the earliest history of Stevens County.
Apart from "A Minnesota Storm," written in 1898 for a high-school newspaper in Madison, Indiana, where he was spending the winter, Eggleston's last article about Minnesota was "The-Man-that-Draws-the-Handcart," published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine for February, 1894. This fond tribute to the picturesque frontiersman, George Northrup, had been accepted and paid for twenty-five years earlier, and its tardy appearance was like an echo out of the dim past. The title was a translation of the Indian name given Northrup by the Sioux, who respected and hated him and in 1864 finally killed him.

Northrup's exploits as a frontier scout rivaling Kit Carson were already well known when Eggleston first met him on the 1860 eclipse expedition; the bookish preacher was particularly impressed by Northrup's acquaintance with great literature and his scholarly diction, and he admired the moral purity and chivalrous behavior that made him, in Eggleston's thinking, unique among frontiersmen as Galahad was unique among the Arthurian knights. That so romantic a figure should excite a literal realist may seem a little strange; but Eggleston made every effort to verify each fact and to give only the unembellished truth. In its issue for February 4, 1894, the St. Paul Pioneer and Press reprinted the Harper's article almost in its entirety, and the editor remarked with justifiable pride that Northrup had once been a correspondent for the Press and that Eggleston was a former St. Paul clergyman. Minneapolis could not call up memories of either man; nevertheless the Journal of February 10 devoted to Eggleston a column of "Literary Gossip," which scolded him because he did "not stay West and build up a Western literary center."

It may be regretted that Eggleston never attempted a systematic record of his Minnesota experience and observations. But even without any such governing plan, his writings about Minnesota, published and still in manuscript, prove in the aggregate to be far from insignificant. His Minnesota experience was not simply grist for his mill. He was well aware of a certain undefined strength, a deep-seated faith in the future, and a character-building influence that together spell Minnesota's contribution to American life. Its material progress and achievements are only surface manifestations. No thoughtful man who has spent a decade in Minnesota could be indifferent to this majestic power.

THE PORTRAIT on page 190 is in the Eggleston Papers in the Collection of Regional History at Cornell University, and the illustration above is from the Mystery of Metropolisville, 47 (New York, 1873).