



BOOK REVIEW

Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865–1912

William D. Green

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 392 p., Cloth, \$32.95.)

In a sequel to his earlier volume, *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Minnesota, 1837–1869*, William Green's latest book, *Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865–1912*, examines a pair of sociohistorical conundrums. First, how in the half-century after the Civil War had a primarily rural midwestern state with a small black population bred a consciousness of social justice for African Americans that ultimately provided the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century with cross-racial leadership figures such as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Donald Fraser, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young? Second, how had the state's reputation for black-white tolerance facilitated a subsequent history that by the onset of the twenty-first century produced some of the nation's worst racial disparities?

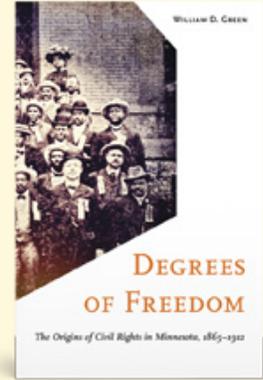
Green's rigorous scholarship makes abundantly clear that the origins of the civil rights movement do not rest in the 1950s with Rosa Parks, the Montgomery bus boycott, and Martin Luther King Jr. While this view of the movement's genealogy persists in some contemporary scholarly works as well as in popular media productions like the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*, it gets no corroboration here.

Beginning in 1865, *Degrees of Freedom* charts the history of civil rights in Minnesota as a microcosm of the nationwide struggle to transform two centuries of enslavement into full citizenship. Green introduces the little-known federal Civil Rights Act of 1866, passed to protect the rights of freed blacks before passage of the Fourteenth Amendment; the Civil Rights Act of 1875, passed to cover discrimination in public transportation, accommodations, and dining; and the "Civil Rights Cases" of 1883 that primarily tested the previous acts. These provide the backdrop for Green's exploration of an increasingly reticulated movement whose Minnesota antecedents began with black suffrage in 1869 and culminated in such intellectual foundations of the civil rights movement as the National Afro-American League (1890) and the Niagara Movement (1905). Green shows how, during the 1902 National Afro-American Council meeting in St. Paul, W.E.B. DuBois and black Minnesota attorney Frederick McGhee developed a working relationship that paved the way for the formation of the interracial NAACP in 1909.

Perhaps the most salutary accomplishment of Green's reconceived and multifaceted history is to penetrate "the veil of nuance so characteristic of race relations in Minnesota at the end of the nineteenth century." Green considers "the manner in which race men and their white patrons talked to each

other about racial advancement," a manner that oscillated between the absence of any conversation, and conversation that occurred

without debate, calcified in civility, free from candor, rife with pretense, conveying only a highly starched, self-satisfied sense of racial harmony, Victorian in style, paternalistic in tone, rigidly confined within a belief that the opportunity to move beyond the status quo was the most radical and therefore subversive of notions.



Green unmasks this syndrome of local mores that underlies the dynamics of persistent racial control, making the central narrative in *Degrees of Freedom* the story of how the "race men" of Minnesota "maneuvered within the political arena governed by those constricting rules of engagement."

The book contextualizes pertinent events through a fascinating cast of African Americans—predominantly male—grouped as the barbers, the entrepreneurs, and the radicals. Green synthesizes insights from scholarly predecessors Earl Spangler, David Vassar Taylor, and Paul Nelson with the recent scholarship of Douglas Bristol (*Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom*). While the roles of black entrepreneurs and radicals are familiar, Green adds the largely unknown experiences of black barbers and other personal service workers and skilled artisans who pioneered new frontiers of negotiation with wealthy white Minnesota patrons. *Degrees of Freedom* paints a heretofore underdeveloped texture of daily life, achieved through historical letters, memoirs, government documents, court records, and African American newspapers, including the *Appeal* and *Western Appeal*, whose editor, John Quincy Adams, performs a pivotal role throughout this narrative.

Read independently or in conjunction with recent Minnesota Historical Society Press volumes *Blues Vision: African American Writing from Minnesota* and *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*, William Green's *Degrees of Freedom* provides a deeply probing and elegantly written reexamination of black and white lives intertwining through race and region.

—John S. Wright

JOHN S. WRIGHT is Morse-Amoco Distinguished Teaching Professor of African American and African Studies and English and founding scholar of the Archie Givens Sr. Collection of African American Literature and Life at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities.

BOOK REVIEW

Minnesota Modern: Architecture and Life at Midcentury

Larry Millett

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 400 p., Cloth, \$49.95.)

Although Don Draper was never spotted on Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis, he would have felt right at home with contemporary Minnesotans' fascination with midcentury design and architecture. The Facebook group TC MCM (Twin Cities Mid-Century Modern) boasts nearly 6,000 members; a 2015 national architecture conference held in Minneapolis by Docomomo, an international organization devoted to documenting and preserving the modern movement, extolled and explored "Modernism on the Prairie"; and a plethora of stores offer mid-twentieth-century decorative arts gems.

With the publication of *Minnesota Modern: Architecture and Life at Midcentury*, Larry Millett, Minnesota's most prolific architectural historian, presents a comprehensive and enticing survey of an architectural style he describes as universal and pervasive. Divided into a prologue and six chapters, the book opens by setting the scene of the new world in a modern age, while subsequent chapters focus on how modernism's ideals of simplicity, rationality, and functionality dominated the design and construction of specific property types associated with corporations and commerce, with entertaining on the road, with architecture of the public realm, with modern faith, and with the midcentury home.

Millett begins the story of midcentury Minnesota with a description of the state's first cloverleaf interchange, constructed in 1937 at the intersection of Highways 12 (now I-394) and 100. He identifies the siting and design of these new highways as a catalyst for unprecedented development that would transform the Twin Cities' "drowsy suburbs . . . [a] cause for both wonder and regret." This theme of gain and loss is woven throughout the book, particularly in his comparison of urban renewal in Minneapolis's Gateway District and St. Paul's State Capitol Mall and I-94 projects, as well as the razed Lutheran Brotherhood Building, Pillsbury House in Wayzata, and many others.

Chapter Three, "Entertaining on the Road," was perhaps the most engaging due to the buildings it explores. Venues include theaters such as Robbinsdale's just-razed Terrace Theatre, designed by Liebenberg and Kaplan, and Ralph Rapson's Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, gone now for 10 years; Met Stadium, which rose "like a giant steel mirage . . . from the middle of parking lots and farm fields"; and motor inns, especially those in out-state Minnesota, such as Olsen's Motel and Gift Shop in Tofte.

No discussion of modernist architecture is complete without a description of the style's characteristic innovative construction materials and techniques. Shortages and

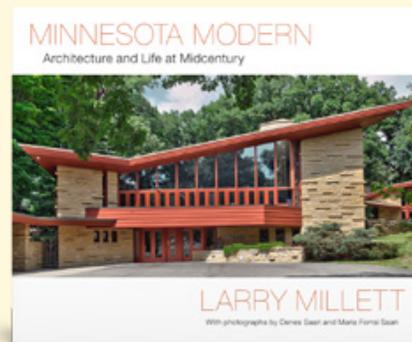
rationing during World War II prompted the development of new materials as a substitute for steel. Martin Capp's kit homes and Close Associates' designs for ready-made homes constructed

on-site by Shakopee's Page and Hill hewed to the modernist tenets of money-saving materials and straightforward, unornamented design. Millett also covers Minneapolis's enclaves of Lustron Corporation's all-metal houses and the Alcoa Care-free House in St. Louis Park designed by Charles M. Goodman in 1958. Houses were not the only structures to experiment with innovative materials. Millett describes the use of Maxmilite, a relatively inexpensive modular system of six-sided pods of steel, brick, and concrete that was favored for parochial schools built by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

This fine book is actually two books: one composed of chapters providing detailed and compelling narratives as noted above and the second book, "Midcentury Modern Houses," a sumptuous portfolio of a dozen homes photographed by Denes Saari and Maria Forrai Saari accompanied by "biographies" of each house. Distinct both visually and textually from the rest of the book, these profiles are sandwiched between the six chapters—an integration that compromises the narrative flow. The final chapter, "The Midcentury Home," continues the incisive cultural and design observations of earlier chapters, yet it appears at the end of the book, long after readers have first encountered the portfolio of midcentury houses.

Happily, the crisp design, presentation, and contents of this comprehensive and meticulously researched book more than compensate for any organizational shortcoming. In the end, *Minnesota Modern: Architecture and Life at Midcentury* will appeal to a wide range of readers: from those interested in how the built environment manifests cultural values; to devotees of the work of homegrown Minnesota architects such as Carl Graffunder, John Howe, HGA, Ellerbe Becket, and Thorshov and Cerny; and to the thousands of Minnesotans who call their midcentury houses "home."

—Patty Dean



PATTY DEAN is gallery and exhibits director for the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. From 1995 to 2004 she was the museum collections supervisory curator at the Minnesota Historical Society.

BOOK REVIEW

We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota

Sabine N. Meyer

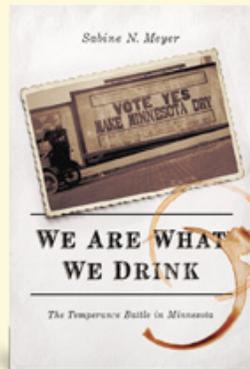
(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 288 p., Cloth, \$55.00.)

A self-described “beer-drinking German,” Sabine Meyer became interested in Minnesota’s temperance movement as a graduate exchange student at the University of Minnesota. What, she wanted to know, had St. Paul’s German American community made of the temperance movement in the century leading up to Prohibition in 1919? Meyer, now a professor of American studies at the University of Osnabrück in Germany, has done extensive research that has resulted in *We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota*, a fascinating volume that explores temperance through multiple lenses of ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and place.

One of Meyer’s contributions is to show that no uniform, national story of temperance exists. Rather, the narratives are local and regional. She focuses on Minnesota for its influential women’s temperance movement, its diversity of religious denominations, and its sizable immigrant communities. St. Paul is of interest because its history, identity, and economy were intertwined with alcohol production and consumption. The whiskey trade was central to its founding, and a “vice” economy developed to compensate for the lack of other industries. With the active support of those in power, St. Paul positioned itself as an anti-temperance city, with opposition to temperance becoming an integral part of what it meant to be a St. Paulite.

While histories of the temperance movement have typically treated it as a moral crusade by middle-class Protestants, *We Are What We Drink* challenges that notion. Through meticulous examination of primary sources—mainstream newspapers, the ethnic press, diaries, letters, city histories, political cartoons, speeches, and civic documents—Meyer demonstrates that a number of shifting agendas were at play. German immigrants were among the strongest temperance resisters, while the Irish were strategic supporters. A uniquely German American identity had formed around sociability, relaxation, and music, with beer a core component. Beer was central, too, to their livelihood, with Germans owning and working in the breweries. Consequently, Germans viewed temperance campaigns as attacks on their culture, incomes, and personal liberty, a stance that Meyer shows became hard to maintain only with the onset of World War I.

In contrast, Minnesota’s Irish immigrants, at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder at the time, were intent on improv-



ing their social standing. Supporting temperance became a strategy for achieving respectability; a means to an end that once achieved led to diminished activism.

While from today’s perspective the fight to prohibit alcohol appears repressive, Meyer argues that women’s temperance activism had a strong progressive element. Participation and leadership in the movement removed women from the private sphere of home, bringing them into the public sphere as speakers, lobbyists, and agitators, laying “the groundwork for the emergence of a female consciousness, solidarity, self-confidence, and expertise.” Here is where temperance activism intersected with the campaign for women’s suffrage, which in 1920 resulted in ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. By linking the movements, *We Are What We Drink* serves as a corrective to prior scholarship depicting temperance and suffrage activism as diametrically opposed.

Meyer sees an emphatic difference between St. Paul and reform-minded Minneapolis, which jumped on the temperance bandwagon. She illustrates how their different founding histories, civic identities, demographics, and economic structures led to divergent responses to temperance. With the exception of one St. Paul residential enclave, Midway—conceived as a village for wealthy businessmen and white-collar workers—the capital city resisted temperance at every turn.

Like any compelling piece of scholarship, this book prompts questions. Why no mention of Minneapolis’s unique, longstanding practice of “patrol limits,” a way to restrict alcohol sales to just a few portions of the city? What of the St. Paul women who weren’t advocating for temperance? Were some acting subversively, consuming alcohol on the down low? Were taverns primarily spaces where male laborers got soused after work, as temperance activists would have it, or did they serve other needs, such as places for sociability? And why is less attention paid to Scandinavian immigrants than to German and Irish?

In showing drink to be an important, complex element of identity, *We Are What We Drink* models the way local and regional scholarship can answer further questions about what people’s drinking practices say about the culture of a place, still an under-examined area of study.

—Bruce Johansen

BRUCE JOHANSEN holds a PhD in American studies from the University of Maryland. A freelance writer, he is a contributor to a forthcoming history of Minneapolis’s Seward neighborhood, once home to the “hub of hell,” a liquor patrol district that resulted in a concentration of drinking establishments in Seward.



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