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Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America (Book Review)

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with words. In his discussion of Haydn's Symphony in D, No. 31 (Hob.I:31, "*Horn Signal*"), Stapert describes the major thematic elements and plots how and when they occur structurally, within each movement (61-64). And, while describing Haydn's *Salve regina* in E (Hob.XXIIIb:1), Stapert explains how each line of text is set musically (29-30). In short, readers of various backgrounds and learning styles are able to engage Stapert's descriptions, and the ability to read music notation, though helpful, is not necessary. Stapert aims at perceptive hearing, not score analysis; he intends that you, his reader, put down the book and listen to Haydn's music—a task easily accomplished with any quality recording found on the internet.

In his last chapter, "Music for Troubled Times," Stapert posits that nineteenth-century notions of progress are partly to blame for general preferences for later composers, who, it is thought, took the insights and techniques of Haydn and perfected them. Additionally, Stapert suggests that Haydn's commitment to creating music that is joyful, animated, and immediately appealing may have been misread as an inability to move beyond the simplistic and commonplace. Rather than viewing Haydn as a precursor to more advanced composers such as Beethoven and Schumann, one may assert that Haydn was realizing a creational norm for music (i.e., its potential to refresh and delight), by virtue of common grace and in his own time and way. To this point, in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Abraham Kuyper acknowledges that "[t]he world of sounds, the world of forms, the world of tints, and the world of poetic ideas, can have no other source than God; and it is our privilege as bearers of his image, to have a perception of this beautiful world, artistically to

reproduce, and humanly to enjoy it."

In the context of this statement, Kuyper explains how music and all the arts point us to the beauties of God's creation, prompt us to rejoice in the redemption accomplished by Christ, and comfort and refresh us when faced with sin and brokenness. Kuyper goes on to emphasize the joy that the arts bring us and the way they constitute an essential aspect of our human existence because, by them, we are able to express and explore beauty, in fulfillment of our cultural mandate.

Generally speaking, Stapert conveys his love for Haydn and Haydn's music, without tending toward hagiography. Haydn's unhappy marriage, infidelities, and other indiscretions are all present, allowing us to truly understand the man, but are not dwelt on or described in a condescending tone. In fact, knowing Haydn, warts and all, tempers Stapert's broader claim, which is that Haydn's Christian faith was a motivating, creative influence and source of inspiration throughout his life. We are wise to remember that the brilliance of Haydn's music was not directly correlative to his faith, for beauty is found, all the time, in the context of fallenness.

Stapert does emphasize one of the central myths of Haydn's life: hard work and perseverance pay off—so stay in school, kids. (In reality, hard work paid off for Haydn and a host of other musicians, but it didn't for many others.) This myth is justified, not only because myths generally tell us something real but also because, by emphasizing the craft by which Haydn's music was made, Stapert directs our attention away from Haydn's success and toward his art. We are reminded that art is *poiesis*, a made thing, which is structured with purpose and requires appropriate reception.

Miller, John E. *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*. University of Kansas Press, 2014. ISBN 9780700619498. Reviewed by James Schaap, Professor of English, Emeritus, Dordt College.

In a wonderfully readable compilation of distinguished biographies, *Small Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys who Shaped America*, John E. Miller documents the shifts that emptied Main Streets throughout the Midwest, closed down schools and businesses, and left an abundance of ghost-town detritus on what has become, once again, a greatly

empty landscape.

That's not the story of Miller's book, however. The story is the stories of men whose childhoods were spent in the small towns all of them left behind but some of them never left spiritually. Miller's *Small Town Boys* is a museum of big men from small towns.

Today America's heartland, in actuality, is not the

rural Midwest at all but the country's cities. "Heartland" is a misnomer, really, because demographics have long ago shifted away from the country's agricultural center. There still is a breadbasket, but Iowa, where I live, is the heart of nothing but the United States map these days. Small towns still exist within our own vast rural areas, but the population shifts, which began more than a century ago, have left those small towns gasping, made them little more than dots on blue highways only journalists travel on the lookout for eccentrics in yawning fly-over country.

What Miller shows, clearly and proudly, is that in their heyday, America's small towns birthed wholesome generations of men of influence. I'm not sure why he chooses men only, but he does, citing his list of prior publications as perhaps unequally weighted with women. He begins his stories with Frederick Jackson Turner, who, more than anyone, touted the powerful effects of white America's burgeoning spread into what it considered the continent's open spaces, as if no one else had ever lived there. Turner grew up in Portage, Wisconsin, during the 1860s, when that small town at the confluence of two rivers was, in fact, the edge of the frontier. The man often cited as this country's first historian of significant authority began his work by studying his own neighborhood, Miller says, then simply stayed with the thesis throughout his life: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."

Miller's gallery includes twenty-two portraits of individuals, most of whom need no introduction—William Jennings Bryan, Henry Ford, George Washington Carver, Bob Feller, James Dean, Walt Disney, Lawrence Welk, John Wooden, and Ronald Reagan. Miller ends with America's retailing leviathan, Sam Walton, a man once reputed to be the richest man in the world. But a few individuals along the way aren't necessarily household names. I'm ashamed to admit I'd never heard of plainspoken Alvin Hansen, who grew up on a farm three miles west of Viborg, South Dakota, just an hour or so away from my home. Had I taken an economics class somewhere along the line, I'm sure I would have run into him; but the fact that he isn't celebrated regionally today (unless I've missed it) may well be because he is still referred to as "the American Keynes," and thus probably disdained by

robust voting blocks right here in his neighborhood.

Nor had I heard of Oscar Micheaux, the African-American filmmaker who spent some time homesteading in South Dakota, then wrote a novel or two about it (*The Homesteader* is now on my Kindle). Micheaux's fame and fortune has been far more celebrated in the nation's Black community because he was the foremost African-American film maker before the industry was, you might say, integrated. Micheaux was the first African-American to create a feature-length film, a movie he created based upon his own experiences homesteading near Gregory, South Dakota. I had no idea.

Throughout the book, I kept wanting to believe that an argument was forming, that the arrangement of biographies would eventually nudge out a thesis to the effect that the Midwestern small-town has had some peculiar critical influence on the character of these accomplished American boys. I wasn't wrong—a thesis did form, but the argument I anticipated was never advanced, not even in the introduction. In fact, Miller begins the book by dampening what expectations someone like myself—a small-town boy throughout most of my life—might expect or at least desire. He makes it very clear that while it might be nice to think that small towns had significantly similar effects on these men, those effects simply aren't traceable because they aren't there. Some of his subjects couldn't leave the small towns of their childhoods fast enough. Some looked back with feverish disdain, and some worshiped their boyhoods from afar but never returned. Some of their worship was pure fantasy. Some, as Americans did for a time, created a cartoon mythos from small-town life. Some claimed reverent fondness, yet, like Henry Ford and Sam Walton, likely did more to destroy small towns than keep them vigorous. Some hated their boyhoods. Sinclair Lewis told the world as much in *Main Street*; then, when his own spit and vinegar dissipated, backed away from the very horrors he'd created.

The real thesis of all these fascinating biographies, and Miller admits it freely, is that any attempt to explain behavior on the basis of some single feature of a person's life story—like one's small-town past—simply can't be done. Human character is too complex. With that admission, Miller steps back and talks somewhat about the importance of "place" in

our lives and, perhaps, the withering away of *place* in a culture so mobile, so connected, so media-driven. “There is no there there,” Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, California.

And while Miller is obviously right in not advancing a thesis he can’t prove, the non-existence of that common core experience becomes a little dispelling, in part because I wanted so badly to find something, anything, that could bring these folks together, other than, of course, their small-town stories and the fact that their own childhood experiences never really left them. What this collection of stories admirably demonstrates is that the child is the father of the man, even though Miller doesn’t even attempt to suggest that “the small town is the father of the man.” There are just too many variables.

And we are ourselves, often as not, puzzles. Take Miller’s assessment of Carl Sandburg, for instance, a giant in his own time, once called “the voice of the Middle West.” Yet Sandburg was a man like his region, largely lost today, even when some of his rustic contemporaries (say Robert Frost) are not. Miller quotes Sandburg asserting his own contradictions: “I hated my home town and yet I loved it. And I hated and loved myself about the same as I did the town and the people.”

Every last one of Miller’s choices deserves a place,

although I think I would have left James Dean on the cutting room floor, his early death at 24 taking him out of life long before he could have matured sufficiently to begin to separate the strands of influences in his life, to distinguish who he was from the Hollywood image he so suddenly created. What gives the stories some consistency—even though there’s little for a common denominator other than a rural American street address—is the recurrent way Miller documents his subjects’ own attitudes toward their personal histories on their own Main Streets.

Small-Town Dreams is a really fascinating read, especially if you like biographies, as I do. Even if the subjects are amply familiar, few of us, I’d guess, have a strong sense of their individual stories. I found every one of the narratives to be interesting and enlightening. What John E. Miller has done is told good stories about important men, stories otherwise too easily lost. In the process, he travels through a world that likely no longer exists, a world where some of America’s finest men and women, its leaders, grew up on fertile Midwestern soil, on streets full of vibrant life and character. As a teacher of literature for more than forty years, I couldn’t help but wonder about who’s telling the good stories these days, about whether or not there are, among the best, stories that grow from that same fertile soil.

Balmer, Randall. *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter*. New York: Basic, 2014. 257 pp. ISBN 978-0-465-02958-7. Reviewed by Dave Schelhaas, Professor of English, Emeritus, Dordt College.

I remember the excitement that many Christians felt as Jimmy Carter campaigned for president in 1976. He came out of nowhere it seemed—at least to those of us in the North—openly speaking of being born again, teaching Sunday School in Plains, Georgia (even during the campaign), saying again and again and with great genuine conviction that the single most important factor in his life was Jesus Christ. At last, we thought, a presidential candidate for whom religious faith is more than a talking point to garner votes. Among the Christians I knew, both Democrats and Republicans were excited by the candidacy of this Bible-quoting peanut farmer and former governor of Georgia.

In this biography, Randall Balmer, Episcopal priest, Dartmouth professor, and author of more than a dozen books—among them the highly re-

garded *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*—tells the life story of Jimmy Carter, but his focus is primarily on the role that religion and specifically evangelicalism played in the rise and fall of Carter. This review will also focus primarily on that theme.

When Carter was running for president, the initial response of evangelicals and fundamentalists was much like the kind that I observed in 1976. The Watergate scandal and Nixon resignation were still fresh in people’s minds, and Carter’s openness and his promise never to lie to the American people were very appealing. Michael Novak, the Catholic philosopher, said of Carter, “He’s for real. He’s them [evangelicals] in their idealized selves” (61).

Carter “embodied a particular, activist strain of evangelicalism called progressive evangelicalism.” In