

WRITER AND JOURNALIST, *Mr. Holbrook is the author of eleven books, seven of which relate in whole or in part to Minnesota. In a revision of an address presented before the society on May 14, he here suggests some local subjects still to be exploited by novelists.*

Some Unwritten

MINNESOTA NOVELS

STEWART HOLBROOK

INTO A CLEARING in the woods, on a seething night in October, 1918, staggered human beings who could go no farther. There was nowhere else to go. Here they must stay, either to live it out, or to die among the stumps. Carlton County was on fire that night. So was much of Aitkin and St. Louis counties. It seemed to the thousands of refugees that all Minnesota was in flames, and for all they could know, the world was on fire.

Into the God-given clearing with them flitted frightened deer, and grouse flew blindly in the weird light. Man and beast together, here was the Peaceable Kingdom strangely set in the midst of hell itself.

Into the clearing, too, came little Katherine Luomala, aged ten, hugging in her arms the cherished things she had snatched when she ran from her home near Cloquet. There was her fine taffeta dress, and wrapped inside was a mewling kitten. Under her other arm she carried her school geography.

Throughout the long night that was never quite dark, the dead and the injured were brought into the clearing. But the sight that Katherine Luomala remembered most vividly was that of a tall blond girl, dressed in flour sacks on which the Gold

Medal label was faded yet visible. She carried only a pair of gleamingly white kid button shoes, high and handsome, and in 1918 the mark of fashion in Paris, in New York, and along the St. Louis River in Minnesota as well.

The gaunt blond girl spoke to little Katherine Luomala, and showed her the elegant shoes which were stuffed to their high tops with letters. "From my sweetheart in the AEF," she said, as if nothing could be more precious. In October, 1918, letters from an American soldier in France were things that a teen-aged girl took with her even when running for her life.

The smoke rolled up more dense than ever, while men and women prayed in a variety of tongues approaching Babel, and watched fascinated to see fire attack great pines one moment, then race in an instant to the very tops and turn whole trees into monstrous torches. Complete confusion reigned, and before a murky daylight had come, the little Luomala girl lost track of the tall blond of the white kid shoes and the soldier's letters. Who was she? Where had she lived? Did she survive Minnesota's great holocaust? Did the boy in the AEF return? Did they marry? And were they happy ever after?

Poe fashioned unforgettable stories around incidents of lesser drama than the blond girl fleeing the wrath of God with her white kid shoes and her sweetheart's letters. So did Ambrose Bierce, and Henry James, and lesser writers. On that one day and night of Minnesota's tragic hour, the substance of many novels was created in Carlton County alone. As for short stories, a thousand of them were being created in and around Cloquet, and Brookston, and Moose Lake. In them all was the stuff of fiction—courage, even heroism, cowardice, meanness, love, and hate, and mystery. Tragedy, of course, and comedy too. Everything, in short, needed to make a novel—except the novelist.

Has the Cloquet fire been used as background and climax for a good honest novel? The earlier disaster at Hinckley became great stage drama in a play, *The Ninety*

REFUGEES *and relief train, 1918*



and the Nine. But so far as I know the disaster named for Cloquet has yet to be used as the essence of a novel. I think it is superb material. And simply because Minnesota long ago became interested in its own story, the novelist who uses the Cloquet fire will have a plenty to work with, including the first-person accounts of Katherine Luomala, now an anthropologist in Hawaii, and many other survivors. You will find them in the Minnesota Historical Society's library, and in the Cloquet library, too. The novelist could also draw orally from scores who went through the fire and, as I know, are now living in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, as well as in Minnesota. In their memories, if stirred a bit, the flames still leap and crackle, and the smoke is choking. . . .

I BEGAN TO KNOW and to love Minnesota long before Cloquet burned; and for the past sixteen years, off and on, I have had occasion to write about Minnesota people and places and events. They appear in several of my books, which are not novels but are history in the real meaning

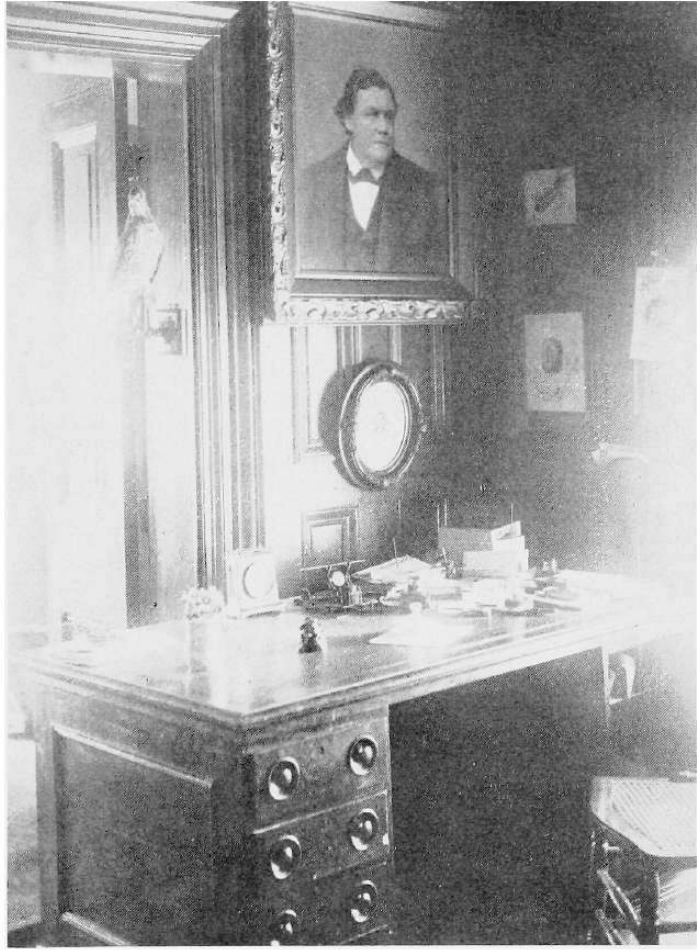
CLOQUET after the fire of 1918



of the word. History is an account of past events. It is also the flesh and blood of many of our great novels. I know of no state, not even my native Vermont, or my adopted Oregon, which offers more thumping good history to the fiction writer than Minnesota. Nor has this history been left in the shaky memory of the oldest living citizen, or to the unbridled imagination of the local tellers of marvels. Thanks to a few literate pioneers of this state — people who had a respect for history — the Minnesota Historical Society was founded in 1849. It seems almost incredible it should have been so, for most American pioneers have been in such haste to clear the forest, to let daylight into the swamp, that they left the accounts of their lives and times to waft away with the smoke of the smouldering stumps. Yet a hundred and three years ago, Minnesotans started writing their state's own story, and preserving it. It is a great story. In it are novels almost beyond count. I should like to suggest a few subjects for such novels.

FOR MANY YEARS I have been one of those Americans whose imaginations take fire from the rune stone dug up in 1898 on the Olof Ohman farm near Kensington. Fiction has been written around it, but no great novel has appeared. I well know, of course, that the authenticity of the stone has been doubted. This matters not at all. No novelist worth his ink worries about authenticity if he comes upon something of just the right character for fiction; and it is as impossible to prove the Kensington rune stone a hoax as it is to prove it genuine — a veritable neolithic record of a party of thirty Swedes and Norwegians far from home and in dire straits. This leaves the novelist wholly free to set his imagination to work. There are no qualifying facts to nag him, nothing to hamper the story he wants to tell.

Whence came those blond and blue-eyed men and women reported by explorers as living among the Sioux? They were seen



DONNELLY's study in his home at Nininger

far too early to have been descendants of captive whites within the range of written history. How explain them? The novelist needs no further clue. And now it is so late only he can explain them.

Consider what a great Minnesota writer accomplished with far less to work upon. I mean the Sage of Nininger, Ignatius Donnelly. Basically, Donnelly was more of a novelist than anything else. He founded his first book, *Atlantis*, on a passage in Plato — a passage, by the way, that strikes me as being more suspect than the runic characters on the stone of Kensington. Yet, by voracious reading of explorers and scientists, and with no little imagination of his own, he built up the theory that there was indeed an island named Atlantis, and that it did sink into the sea with all its civilization of a thousand years.

So charming a writer was Donnelly, and

THE GREAT CRYPTOGRAM:

FRANCIS BACON'S CIPHER in The
SO-CALLED SHAKESPEARE PLAYS.



BY IGNATIUS DONNELLY, Author
of "Atlantis: The Antediluvian World," and
"Ragnarök: The Age of Fire and Gravel."



"And now I will vnclasp a secret booke
And to your quicke conceyving Discontents
Ile reade you flatter, deepe and dangerous,
As full of perill and aduenturous spirit,
As to oerwalke a current, roaring loud,
On the vnited soft footing of a Speare."

In Henry IV., Act 4, Sc. 3.



Chicago,
New York and London.
R. S. Peale & Company
1888.

TITLE page of a Donnelly first edition

so persuasive, that he convinced hundreds of thousands of Americans and Europeans. The book went through many editions. (Harpers were unable to tell me just how many copies were sold, but "well over one million.") *Atlantis* was reprinted as recently as three years ago. I have no doubt it will be reprinted again.

Then, this genius of Nininger took the all-but-forgotten Baconian controversy in his eager hands, and around it composed a remarkable tour de force, *The Great Cryptogram*, to "prove" that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. I doubt that many of us alive today would ever have heard of Bacon were it not for Donnelly, writing furiously in his decaying city of Nininger. He wrote other books, too, and in between them he served Minnesota as lieutenant governor, as Congressman, and also took time out, in pamphlet and on the platform, to scare the daylights out of a goodly portion of the United States. I tell you Donnelly was a tremendous character.

He would make a fine subject for fiction, for his town-building activities were unique. Nininger was no dream of land sharks. Donnelly planned it to be a center, in fact *the* center, of learning and agriculture. Man was to work in the field, but in the study, too. The town was to combine the best of abstract thought and of material things. Nininger came into being long before Butler wrote *Erewhon*, and at a time and a place where land swindles were big business.

Donnelly himself no doubt lacked what unimaginative persons call "balance." But he was the most colorful Minnesotan I have read about. I think he was touched with genius. I know that a good novelist could make of his life, either as Ignatius Donnelly or under a fictional name, one of the unforgettable characters of American fiction.

I have looked into and used a small amount of the Minnesota Historical Society's incomparable collection of Donnelly material. Some five years ago, Alfred A. Knopf, the well-known New York publisher, was searching for a novelist to do something about Donnelly. Nothing came of it. One can still hope, however, that a novelist will appear; and when he does, the society's collection is awaiting. He also should talk with J. R. Landy, the "Uncle Jim" and long-time publisher of the *Olivia Times-Journal*, who knew Donnelly well and admired him.

A VASTLY DIFFERENT, though most appealing, character in Minnesota history was Hans Mattson, who came to the United States from Sweden in 1851. He did not like the Illinois region, where many of his countrymen were settling. He went up the Mississippi looking for the promised land, and discovered it near Red Wing, where he founded the famous Vasa settlement and induced many Swedes to follow him there. He went on to become secretary of the state board of immigration for Minnesota, made trips to the old country, and

stalked Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, telling them of the wonders of New Scandinavia.

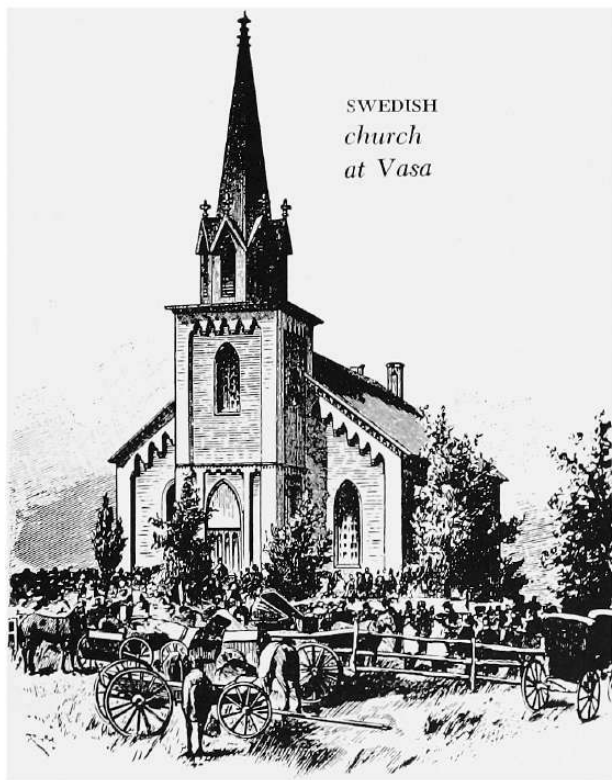
This was risky work. Both state and church opposed him. He was subjected to vicious attacks by the press. He was threatened with violence. He persevered, however, and the people listened to him. They came over, first by the hundred, then by the thousand; and Mattson himself showed them where the soil was deep and black, the grass was green, and the cool waters flowed through the forest. Still later, Mattson worked for the Northern Pacific Railroad. His pipes were still clear and captivating, and lo, the lands of the first great railroad across the Northwest were settled by assorted Scandinavians, and to the great good of our country. The same was true in some degree in western Canada, where Mattson labored a while. He was perhaps the greatest single influence in the continuing migration to the Northwest from Scandinavia.

There is much material in the society's collections about Hans Mattson. From it a novelist could create the likeness and personality of this huge, bearded, almost Biblical figure, honest as the day, who did so much for Minnesota and for the United States. I have never forgotten a friend, born in Red Wing of Swedish parents, telling me of something his father often repeated — which was to bless the name of Hans Mattson who had talked him into leaving his native land, then had shown him the land of Canaan, which in his case turned out to be Goodhue County in Minnesota.

EARLIER THAN Mattson or Donnelly, and surely just as interesting, was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who gave to Michigan many of its most musical "Indian" names, which he fashioned from English, Latin, Arabic, and Chippewa sounds. Later he turned his talents to Minnesota, to create the honored and perfect name of Itasca, which is composed of doubtful Latin. His

studies of the Lake States Indians are still consulted for their firsthand value, while his genius in the making up of names for places has perhaps not been equaled. There was considerable romance in Schoolcraft's life, too; and his wife was an authentic granddaughter of an authentic Indian chief. She also read Latin and spoke several languages.

Minnesota can claim Schoolcraft only in part, but there is nothing to prevent a Minnesota novelist from weaving an engaging story of this man who started life making fine glass in Vermont and New Hampshire, then went into the West to become what many believe to have been the most effective Indian agent of all time. He had adventures to match those of the Mountain Men of the Far West, and his understanding of the red men was infinitely greater. I discovered how little known he is when I started asking Minnesotans (and Michigan people, too) who Schoolcraft was, and also what did Itasca mean. None answered the first question. The reply to the other was simple: "An Indian name."



THEN, THERE WAS strange Oliver Hudson Kelley, the tramp telegrapher and printer, who ranged all over the Midwest before he settled near Elk River and thought he was a farmer. Farm he did, too — a little — but he preferred to report about farms and farming. Before long, the bureau of agriculture in Washington was receiving, unasked, marvellously clear and detailed letters from this homesteader of Elk River. Astonished at the knowledge of a region hardly settled, coming from the very backwoods, the bureau men had the good judgment to invite Kelley to Washington, then sent him throughout the South to report on conditions following four years of devastating war. He did so ably.

But Kelley was also a dreamer, and the vision which he and a handful of friends conjured up became the Patrons of Husbandry, or the Grange. This was his great contribution to rural America.

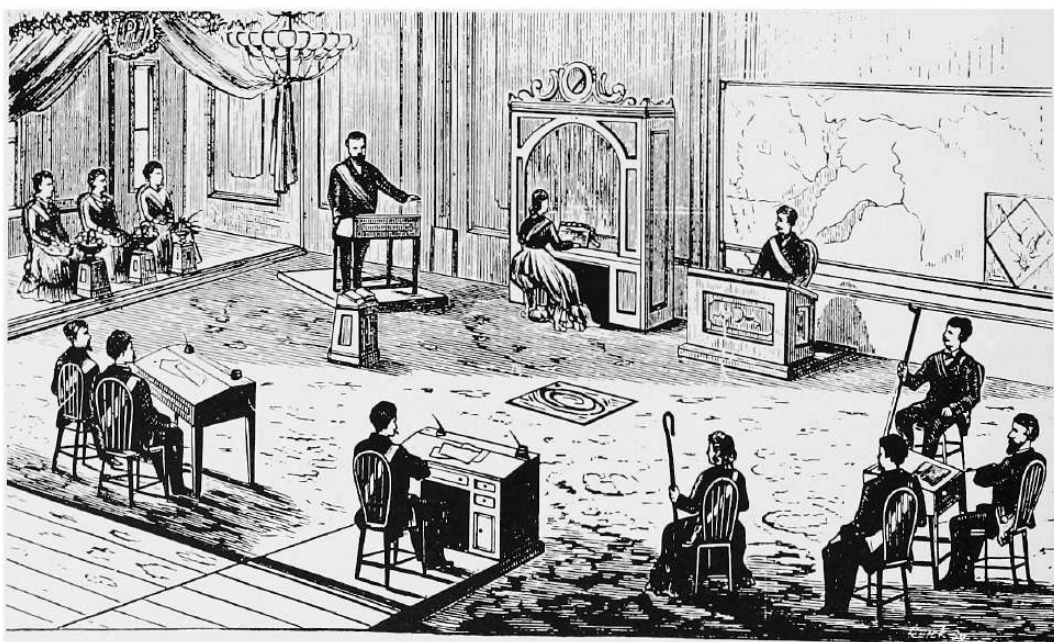
It was a sore time for farmers, in the 1870's. They were the forgotten men. No one had been able to organize them. Their voice was lost in the clamor of industrialists. In the Grange they were to find the

strength that started them on the way to their comparatively pampered present. Yet they were most difficult to organize. Kelley did the job. He swept out of Washington, then across the intervening states, like a prairie fire, to arrive in the Midwest with the torch in his hand. Wherever he went, Granges sprang up in his wake, until thousands of farmers in Minnesota and elsewhere felt they had become a genuine brotherhood.

Politicians began to pay heed to their complaints, and presently the railroads, which had become arrogant, were under the first concerted attack they had ever known. "We'll put a ring in their noses!" shouted Kelley, speaking beside water tanks and grain elevators and haystacks 'way across the nation. And they did. It was magnificent drama. The Grangers taught the railroads better manners, and tamed them somewhat; and if this had been their only achievement, they had not done their work in vain.

The story of Kelley, who was called the "Human Engine" because of his restless energy, is the story of his many adventures

A GRANGE room, with officers in position



KELLEY'S
house near
Elk River



while ranging the United States and organizing the rural folk, of making them respect their own occupation as tillers of the soil. Jack London could have written a rousing novel on the life of Oliver Kelley. Had the subject interested Sinclair Lewis, which I happen to know it did not, the Nobel Prize man of Sauk Centre would have made a national hero of some fictional character very much like Kelley.

JAMES JEROME HILL is of course one of the truly great characters who are properly identified with Minnesota. It would be presumptuous to do more here than to mention his name. His work is too well known. He might appear in a novel either as hero or villain, for he is still a controversial figure. What nobody can doubt, however, is that Hill, with his one good eye, saw more and farther than did most men of his time with two; or doubt that he was one of the greatest influences in the settlement of the West. He had half a dozen novels in him before ever he got as far west as the Red River.

Of less influence than Hill, but an even greater "character," was George Stuntz, the Old Nestor of the Head of the Lakes. This

frost-nipped, fly-bitten, yet genial soul was the man who put a horseload of iron ore on his back and packed it overland from Lake Vermilion to Duluth—the first such ore to be brought into that town. Nor was that all he did, before or after. It was he more than any other one man who put Minnesota into the iron ore business. His rewards were eight dollars a day, when he worked, and the naming of a town for him. It was probably all the reward he wanted.

George Stuntz has appeared in at least two novels I have read, but he came to life in neither of them, nor were the novels very good. They were forgotten at once. Stuntz still awaits a storyteller of the first mark. I could wish that Walter O'Meara would do something about Stuntz.

Another figure awaiting fictional treatment is Victor L. Power, the so-called fighting lawyer of Hibbing. I have never studied his life and influence; thus I am not competent to assess them. Yet I have spent enough time on the Mesabi to know that Power is already a legendary character, hence material for a novel. Every legend is ripe for fiction. I'd venture a guess that Victor Power would make an exciting novel.

MOST, if not all, historical societies, as I know well enough, do not consider murder within their province. I think this attitude is stuffy. I would not urge learned groups to collect material on just any old murder, for most murders are rather dull to read about.

Yet, once in a long time there comes a crime that has about it certain qualities that make it a classic. Such was the death of pretty Kitty Ging, the dressmaker of Nicollet Avenue, who rode in a covered buggy to her doom near the shore of Lake Calhoun. The murder was preceded by romance, but what sets it apart from the common run were the elaborate and diabolically careful preparations of the man responsible for the crime, not the killer. These put the Kitty Ging affair into the category that murder story fans reserve for the classic.

Before ever I heard else of Kitty Ging, I listened to a former Minnesotan, then working as a logger in far-off Oregon, who sat on a deacon seat in a bunkhouse and gave forth with a doleful ballad of many verses entitled "The Fatal Buggy-Ride." The ballad concerned none other than Kitty Ging, who had left the gorgeous West Hotel on Hennepin Avenue, the pride of old Minneapolis, for a ride into eternity. When a person, or a crime, or an event of almost any sort is made the subject of a folk ballad, it is proof that the matter has become legendary, and is ready to take form in a play or a novel. Witness Jesse James, Jim Fiske, Casey Jones, the Johnstown flood, Paul Revere's ride, and the jam on Garry's Rock.

Has Kitty Ging been the subject of a novel? I asked the question of several old friends and acquaintances in Minnesota. None could say that she had. Nor do I know if the society has collected the material about this celebrated case. What I do know is that poor Kitty's story contains every element needed by an author who is in search of material for the perfect tragedy.

FOR SIXTEEN years, off and on, I have occasionally had the pleasure of working in the society's collections. Each time I have marveled at the extent of the material I was seeking. (A single scrapbook, made by the second wife of Ignatius Donnelly, kept me busy and fascinated for two whole days.) And although I have seen or used a mere fraction of the immense storehouse of history in St. Paul, I have sufficient knowledge of it to judge it to contain the substance for a thousand novels, to use a good, handy figure.

So, let no Minnesota writer of fiction go afar looking for suitable material until he has spent at least a few days in his own back yard. That is the place where Russell Conwell, once a famous author and lecturer, said there were "acres of diamonds." Conwell's type of lecture has long since gone out of fashion. His implied criticism has not. Our own back yards are often filled with symbolical diamonds. Lydia E. Pinkham discovered as much when she speculated in an alleged gold mine near Monte Cristo Mountain in Snohomish County, Washington. She forgot, temporarily, the gold mine in her own back yard in Lynn, Massachusetts.

I hope no writer of Minnesota will go searching for a Forever Amber in some faraway place until he has considered poor Kitty Ging, or look for a Scarlett O'Hara until he has reflected on the tall blond girl in the smoke-filled clearing near Cloquet, hugging her high white kid shoes and letters. I hope, too, he will not go prospecting for new David Harums until he has thought upon the Sage of Nininger, or any other of perhaps a score of Minnesotans who contain the very stuff of fiction.

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Cloquet on page 46 was supplied by the Weyerhaeuser Sales Company of St. Paul; that of refugees from the fire of 1918 is published by courtesy of the *St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press*. The view of Donnelly's study on page 47 was photographed by Howard W. Crosby in 1905. The print of the Vasa Church is reproduced from Mattson's *Reminiscences*, p. 305; and that of a Grange room comes from John G. Wells, *The Grange Illustrated* (1874).



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