

A History of Minnesota Histories

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ON THE OCCASION of its 125th anniversary, the St. Paul Companies, Inc., recently made a gift of \$100,000 to the Minnesota Historical Society to prepare a new and comprehensive history of Minnesota. The grant is not only a munificent one to the cause of history in the state but also a most appropriate one, for it is presented by Minnesota's oldest business corporation (1853) to the state's oldest institution (1849), both founded when Minnesota was a territory. The St. Paul Companies (originally St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company) and the Minnesota Historical Society each had several years of existence behind them when the state of Minnesota was received into the Union in 1858. The grant also provides an excellent example of the private and public sectors' collaborating to update and interpret the story of the state.

The prospect of a new history sent me to the shelves of the Minnesota Historical Society's superb library to survey the stable of histories published over the past twelve decades. There are dozens of such histories — some slender, others huge. Some are multivolume histories embodying the biographical approach to the state. Others are "mug" books — or subscription histories — of varying quality. Many are antiquarian in nature, profuse with anecdotes, filled with local lore, and thin on accuracy. Most are narrative accounts of people, places, and events that came together in Minnesota-made history. Only a rare few synthesize the Minnesota experience and attempt to organize a pattern and interpret the meaning of the Minnesota story.

The challenge to any state historian is to distill from the most up-to-date sources the distinctive aspects of the state's character and to relate it to the comparative experience of other states as well as to that of the nation. The basic pursuit revolves around three questions: What is significant in the evolution of the state? How do you portray the spirit of place and its people? How do you delineate that acquired identity that exists among the people who inhabit the state boundaries?

Four histories of Minnesota, in my judgment, stand

out: Edward Duffield Neill's *History of Minnesota*, William Watts Folwell's four-volume *A History of Minnesota*, Theodore C. Blegen's *Minnesota: A History of the State*, and William E. Lass's *Minnesota: A Bicentennial History*. Rereading these four seminal state histories inevitably led me to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

Neill's history came from the pen of an enterprising Minnesota pioneer Presbyterian clergyman — the territory's first commissioner of education, first chancellor of the University of Minnesota, second secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, founder of Macalester College, and a member of Lincoln's presidential staff. The work is written in an engaging narrative style. He interweaves extended quotations from firsthand sources with his own writing. Neill exercised little discrimination in selecting the sources he drew upon, nor did he develop much skill in the art of editing. He rarely offered criticism or explanatory commentary; rather, he let contemporaries relate their own story. Where a firsthand account did not exist, Neill frequently relied on letters and conversations with survivors of an event, and he would interpolate this information in his own words. Few historical collections were at hand, and even fewer historical treatments of Minnesota history were available to him.

Neill's readable style reflects the conversational tone of one who had witnessed many of the occurrences he described. On pages 451–452 of the Fourth Edition — considered the best — Neill sets forth his view of the historian's role: "The duty of the historian is simply to narrate facts; and his views concerning living men, and their public acts, are not to be expected." The deficiencies in Neill's theory and practice of history are his indiscriminate use of sources, inadequate structure, and lack of focus. Stories on consecutive pages have little in common. On page 472, Neill describes a different event in each of the four paragraphs on the page. The four events are disconnected. On the other hand, repetition is common. Stories are repeated in different parts of the work. On pages 70 and 455, Neill relates the same story of the killing of a defenseless Chippewa woman by Sioux

braves. On pages 53 and 166, he repeats the same account of how the Assiniboine became enemies of the Sioux. His need for an editor is apparent throughout. Neill's narrative makes interesting reading, but its lack of direction, imbalance in treatment of important topics, and uncritical use of sources limits the work's value for today's students of Minnesota history. Nevertheless, it inaugurated an auspicious beginning for the writing of state history in 1858 — the year Minnesota achieved statehood. Among state histories it is a bibliographical landmark.

THE MOST impressive of any history of the state is Folwell's classic four-volume work, published between 1921 and 1930. Written when he was in his eighties and nineties, it climaxed Folwell's remarkable career as Civil War veteran, first president of the University of Minnesota, revered teacher of political science, and the state's foremost educational statesman and philosopher. Folwell's vigorous style reflects his closeness to the scene he describes. His long life coincided closely with the entire sweep of statehood until his death in 1933. His personal friendships among Minnesotans were broad and deep. An absorbing narrative based upon a lifetime of experience, observation, and study, Folwell's history ranges far beyond Neill's. His work unfolds in the first three and one-half volumes along a chronological timeline and is related as a story. However, Folwell's account is filtered through his own analysis after painstaking evaluation of the sources. His sense of proportion of the elements of Minnesota history is superior to Neill's. One exception is the Sioux and Civil wars, to which he devotes an entire volume — the second. Occasionally he deviates from the chronological thread for dramatic effect. In his lengthy discussion of the Sioux Uprising in volume two, he takes up the significance of battles before dissecting their causes and principal actors. One can argue convincingly that Folwell could have condensed the volume and thus spared the reader much of the detail he includes and improved the cohesiveness of this segment of his history — obviously one of his favorites.

The unifying theme of Folwell's history is the state's political saga. His copious annotations verify the overriding dominance of this feature. Folwell expressed occasional concern over his emphasis on political and military events, for on page 58 of the third volume he apologizes for the concentration on such events by previous historians "as if the mass of the people had no history." However, he never emulates his prophetic statement that "a better fashion has arrived." His chapter headings in volumes one and three conform to eras of important governors in the tradition of political histories.

Folwell subscribes to the "great man" theory of history. Into each period dominant personalities are intro-

duced, and their lives and achievements against the backdrop of their respective eras are recounted. A handful — Henry H. Sibley, Alexander Ramsey, Joseph R. Brown, Henry M. Rice, and Ignatius Donnelly — are given intensive treatment. And much of volume four is devoted to the careers of twelve figures who made pioneering contributions and whom Folwell terms "apostles."

Folwell receives high marks on research and annotation. He carefully weighed sources. Where inadequate sources left gaps in the record he went out and created them through interviews with firsthand participants. When historical evidence was conflicting, he presented alternative interpretations and stated his preference as to what he thought was the more plausible answer. Examples are on page 452 of an appendix in volume one, where authorship of the Dakota language dictionary is discussed, and page 374 of volume two that highlights the difficulty of finding the truth behind the conflicting accounts of the two Sioux attacks on New Ulm. Long appendixes in each volume are devoted to unresolved research problems. They constitute invaluable troves of information about Minnesota history.

Folwell's work, particularly the first two volumes, is a remarkable contribution to the field of state history. He writes forthrightly and courageously — witness his account of the fraudulent taking of Indian lands by timber companies. His biases are obvious. His background as a Civil War soldier and professor of political science account for the inordinate amount of attention given to the sixteen foundational years that carried the Minnesota country into territorial status and through statehood — years 1849–1865.

The work is not without its blind spots. Given scant attention is the role of Grand Portage in the fur trade and the relationship of Forts Ripley, Ridgely, and Abercrombie to the westward-moving frontier. The cession of the north bank of the Sioux Indian Reservation along the Minnesota River in 1858 is inadequately explained; the economic development of the state is discussed only in the context of political events; and never mentioned is Minnesota's rising role as the nation's largest producer, at the same time, of flour and iron ore and as a meat-packing leader with huge stockyards. Folwell gives inadequate attention to the rivalry between St. Paul and Minneapolis and Duluth and Superior and to the role of the Twin Cities as the metropolitan center of a multi-state region. And he overlooks the growing influence of the state's increasingly potent labor movement.

Just as Neill drew his historical perspective from the frontier of Indians and fur traders, Folwell interpreted Minnesota history through its political institutions and the evolving tradition he observed over eight decades and three generations. His candid analyses and personal judgments enliven his pages and have enriched the ex-

perience of learning Minnesota history for tens of thousands of Minnesotans. His historical judgments are freely given and possess a remarkable timelessness, but they are not infallible. In looking into the future on pages 552–553 of volume three, for example, he predicts: “The defeat suffered by the Farmer-Labor party in the campaign of 1924 indicates that it will soon go the way of the Greenback-Labor, the Farmers’ Alliance, and the Populist aggregations.”

THEODORE C. BLEGEN’S one-volume work, upon publication in 1963, instantly became the standard one-volume history of Minnesota. Blegen himself characterized it as a “narrative history” written for the “general public.” It is organized chronologically, with occasional chapters on topical themes. The book’s dominant qualities are a broad context and a graceful style laced with abundant and pungent quotations and colorful adjectives and phrases.

The direction of the story is one of progress. Geography is seen as fundamental to the state’s development, but “the history of the region turns on what men have done with and to the resources.” For Blegen, “history is people — the record of their doings, their hopes and dreams, their successes and failures.” While Folwell called for a broader view of state history, Blegen pioneered it with his “grass roots” emphasis on social history. Unlike Neill and Folwell, Blegen does not emphasize politics. A many-sided view of the Minnesota story is provided — social, cultural, economic, educational, political, and military. In Blegen’s eyes, it is the agricultural, industrial, and educational forces that have propelled the state’s progress.

Blegen’s history is distinguished for its lucid, flowing style and overall balance. No other historian has integrated so many aspects of Minnesota history into a single account. Some areas are inadequately covered — the labor story, for instance — but his comprehensive approach is impressive, and several portions offer new interpretations not found elsewhere.

Blegen’s history is optimistic. The law of progress — except for the Sioux Uprising, grasshopper plagues, and the World War I Public Safety Commission — is immutable. Minnesotans, when confronted with challenges, meet them with “reserves of courage, toughened by traditions” (page 459). Blegen’s pride in his native state and its people animates the book throughout.

William E. Lass’s bicentennial history is really an extended interpretive essay on distinctive aspects making up the state’s tradition. Provocative in his fresh interpretations, he explains how Paul Bunyan, the Kensington Rune Stone, and Herman the German have been added to the state’s mythology. For Lass, frontier expansion was “perhaps the single most significant force in shaping America.” The majority of the book’s pages are

devoted to the prestatehood period (Minnesota does not become a state until page 103). The peopling of the state and the development of industries dependent upon extractive resources are other prominent themes. Lass offers a vision of twentieth-century Minnesota by touching on the importance of technology in modernizing the state, but twentieth-century Minnesota receives scant attention. Chapter headings illustrate Lass’s interest in the frontier theses: “Europeans in the Wilderness,” “America Asserts Herself,” “Minnesota’s Quest for Empire,” “Trials of Statehood,” “Peopling the Land,” and “Three Frontiers.”

Lass shares Blegen’s view in stressing progress and the white man’s taming of the wilderness. The land and its natural resources form the fulcrum of his account. But Lass moves historical interpretation ahead in recognizing that Minnesotans — and all Americans — are now faced with a serious challenge. Nature’s resources — bountiful in Minnesota except for energy — have been harnessed, and yet our demands continue to increase. Lass is not as optimistic about Minnesota’s future as Blegen, Folwell, and Neill were. For him, the future “will be determined by those new frontiersmen who, equipped with knowledge — if not wisdom — gleaned from the past, must make those decisions that will keep nature and technology and man’s needs and desires in balance” (page 215).

Each of the histories by Neill, Folwell, Blegen, and Lass have contributed to our understanding of the individualistic state of Minnesota. Of the four, Neill stands out for its amiable style, pioneering achievement (published only two weeks after Minnesota achieved statehood), and longevity (issued in eight editions between 1858 and 1882); Folwell for its breadth, research, candor, durability, and authoritative interpretation; Blegen for its elegant style, emphasis on people’s history, and broad perspective; and Lass for raising new questions and presenting fresh interpretations.

The St. Paul Companies’ grant provides a fresh opportunity to interpret the Minnesota story anew. The work calls for a team approach. It will be a one-volume work that devotes more than half of the space to the twentieth century when the Minnesota economy evolved from heavy dependence on natural resources and developed “brain” and service industries. The role of the Twin Cities as a financial and cultural capital of a multistate region will be an important theme. Other segments will include Minnesota’s experience during the turmoil of the 1960s and the increasing role sons and daughters of the North Star State assumed in the life of the nation.

The book will continue the Neill-Folwell-Blegen-Lass tradition of readability and will have the finest talents in editing and book design. The new history will be produced by a team of historians/editors headed by June D. Holmquist, the society’s assistant director for re-

search and publications, and myself. Coauthors with me will be Lucile M. Kane and William E. Lass. The book will be heavily illustrated with a blend of color and black-and-white photos and sketches. Another feature will be a list of suggested historic places at the end of each chapter where the reader can continue his or her excursion into the places where people, geography, and events met to create the ongoing story we call history.

The St. Paul Companies is to be commended both for its deep sense of history and its generosity that make this effort possible and for giving the authors the freedom to interpret the Minnesota story for Minnesotans as they approach the twenty-first century. The venture will be an exciting one for the Minnesota Historical Society during the next three years. The society will be solely responsible for the book's research and interpretation.

BOOK REVIEWS

***Billy Williams: Minnesota's Assistant Governor.* By Maurice W. Britts.**

(St. Cloud, Minn., North Star Press, 1978. xii, 198 p. Illustrations. Cloth \$7.95, paper \$5.95.)

IN THE PAST, the job of executive office aide to the governor of Minnesota was a choice patronage position. Although it was a highly sought-after position, the occupant usually enjoyed only a brief tenure in office due to the whims of the electorate. Each succeeding governor exercised the right of appointing a partisan executive aide who in fact would serve as both his appointment secretary and confidant. It was an unusual occurrence to have an executive aide outlast his sponsor in office. It was more unusual yet to have one remain in office for fifty-three years. Such was the case of Billy Williams, the first and only Black executive aide to the governors of Minnesota.

Billy Williams was invited to join the executive staff of Governor John A. Johnson in 1903. He finally accepted the offer in 1904 after turning down a contract to play professional baseball. He was fortunate to have caught the eye of the governor. Patronage positions for Black party faithfuls seldom amounted to more than janitorial positions in the State Capitol building. It was to Williams' credit that he took the position offered him because, of course, it would take another fifty years before Black baseball players would be allowed to play in the white professional leagues. Executive aide to the governor was probably the most prestigious job held by a Black man in state employ since Frank (John Francis) Wheaton's election to the Minnesota house of representatives in 1899. Wheaton's tenure was brief, lasting only one legislative session. Although Governor Johnson would die in office five years later, Billy Williams' career was launched. During his tenure in office Williams would serve fourteen governors in succession. According to the author, he grew to be respected and loved by all who came to know him.

Billy Williams: Minnesota's Assistant Governor, by Maurice Britts, is a biographical account based in part upon Williams' diary, supplemented by oral testimonials by intimate friends

and associates. The author portrays Williams as a Chesterfieldian gentleman endowed with the wisdom of Solomon and equipped with the patience of Job. Although never aggressive and quietly assertive, he managed the affairs of office with adroitness and diplomatic aplomb. He was a friend to visiting children, a sounding board for distressed citizens, chief protocol officer for visiting dignitaries, and confidant to governors. In essence he was a man for all seasons. When Williams died in 1963, several years after his official retirement, the state of Minnesota officially mourned the passing of a trusted and respected civil servant.

Alas, the lives of exemplary men in state employment are not always the stuff of which good biographies are made. After reading this book one is struck with the impression that Williams' life is a story that needs to be told, but more appropriately in article form. The book is not a substantive treatment. It contains too little information stretched too far between snatches of Minnesota history. One of the central themes of the book is the alleged confidentiality that Williams shared with Minnesota governors. The author suggests that, as a confidant of the politically powerful, Williams' timely and quiet counsel influenced the course of legislation and the resolution of sensitive issues, and aided in the amelioration of the Black man's condition in Minnesota. None of these does the author prove conclusively. In spite of the attempt, Williams does not emerge as Minnesota's Talleyrand.

Not only is the content disappointing from a political perspective, the title is a misnomer. Williams was never anything more than a governor's aide, a functionary who made appointments and kept schedules with other expanded responsibilities. At the very best, he was an assistant to the governor, never assistant governor, a title suggesting definitive powers. As a Black man in the opening decades of the twentieth century, even in Minnesota, he could aspire to nothing higher. Indeed, he was fortunate to have caught the eye of the newly elected governor. It was Williams' athletic prowess and quiet demeanor, not necessarily his intellectual ability, that won the position for him.

The author's attempt to underscore Williams' strength of character ultimately does him a great injustice. The things that Williams ought to be applauded for are hardly acknowledged by the author. Britts' portrayal of Williams is more in keeping with a hero in a Greek tragedy. In this instance our hero's

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