Book Reviews

Women's History in Minnesota: A Survey of Published Sources and Dissertations.

Compiled by Jo Blatti.
(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993. 124 p. Paper, $14.95.)

In 1977 I bought a copy of *Women of Minnesota*, a collection of 16 biographical essays and many thumbnail sketches about notable white women from the settlement period to the present. The book was one of the first such statewide compilations, and it represented an ambitious step beyond individual biography toward a much more comprehensive understanding of women's activities in state and regional history.

"You've come a long way, baby" is surely one of the more revolting advertising slogans of the twentieth century, yet some such exclamation is inevitable when comparing Blatti's comprehensive survey, *Women's History in Minnesota*, with the earlier volume. The new publication offers a guide to 844 published women's-history sources in a thoroughly organized, annotated, and indexed volume. The vast majority of the material has been published since 1977, thus proving that it is not an overstatement to speak of the "explosion" of women's history in the past 20 years.

The distribution of topics is as interesting as their sheer number. Blatti and her advisers found that standard Library of Congress and historical categories did not adequately represent women's experiences, and so they devised a topical organization by following the documents. Roughly, the bibliography moves in 13 categories from personal identity through immediate social organization, such as the family, to the more formal public sphere. This sounds simple, but as Blatti remarks, "This bibliography's effective shape is one of webs or threads weaving back and forth among private and public spaces or commitments." The bibliography weaves the densest web around a key finding of women's history—the recognition that "much public work of the culture is carried on in ostensibly private family and domestic settings"—by listing some of the same sources under "social life" and "natural sciences and health" and again under "economics and employment" and "law and government."

Interestingly, the largest category in the bibliography is "organizations and clubs," with 192 entries, almost as many as the next two categories, "economics and employment" and "life history," combined. The section on "cultural, ethnic and group affiliation" is disappointingly small (40 entries), but one can reasonably expect it to grow rapidly in the next few years.

This is an eye-opening bibliography, impressive for the quantity, quality, and organization of its sources. It is an essential tool for the *next* task, which is to rewrite Minnesota's and all states' histories so that women are integral to the story.

Reviewed by Susan Armitage, *coeditor (with Elizabeth Jameson) of* The Women's West *and the author of numerous articles on western women's history. She was the senior editor of the Garland Press bibliography,* Women in the West: A Guide to Manuscript Sources *(1991).*

Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier.

By Robert R. Dykstra.
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993. 348 p. Cloth, $47.50.)

Before the Civil War, the persistent and explosive issue of slavery and its extension into the territories made the United States a truly divided house. As fiery rhetoric on both sides inflamed Congressional debate in Washington and settlers took up arms in bloody confrontations on the midwestern frontier, the question of slavery all but shattered the underpinnings of a young America in a way that no foreign threat ever could. But it oversimplifies the matter to view the conflict purely in terms of regional tensions—whether half a nation could hold slaves while the other half was free. The issue of African Americans' place in the national tapestry was far more complex, especially when they were not slaves. Many northern midwesterners, even members of various abolitionist communities, held strong antislavery sentiments while also being anti-African American; the question of full citizenship for free blacks was as unsettling as it was unsettled. Whites would carry forth this ambivalence, somewhat modified, throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, Iowa's history of race relations is especially noteworthy.

Bright Radical Star chronicles Iowa's remarkable social and political evolution from being the most racist free state in the antebellum North to one of the most egalitarian. The author's meticulously researched account begins in 1833 when the land was officially opened for settlement, showing how the territorial government, controlled principally by former south-

erners, enacted codes and exclusionary policies that banned the immigration of free blacks. As progressives steadily made gains to overturn such policies, conservatives broached lawyerly compromises that rationalized black citizenship to be a "gift" rather than an inalienable right. Dykstra shows how the arrival of an increasing number of northerners, many from abolitionist New England, changed the body politic.

But this is more than just a story about the campaign for civil rights. *Bright Radical Star* sheds light on the disputes among various abolitionist groups that championed full citizenship for African Americans. The tension between the Congregationalists and the Methodists and between church-affiliated abolitionists and the Garrisonians (a group that had many secular critics, including, in time, Frederick Douglass), resulted initially in a fractured assault on institutionalized racism.

It seems odd that such tensions over civil rights occurred in a state where the black population was exceptionally small. There was no flood of fugitive slaves and no burgeoning free-black community. From 1840 through 1880 the black population was hardly significant, never exceeding 0.6 percent of the state's total. "How then," Dykstra asks, "could they have been an issue?" The answer, he submits, is that frontier Iowans "reacted not to the *fact* of a black presence but to the *prospect* of it." The state shared a border with slave-holding Missouri; proximity posed a constant threat of "an overwhelming inrush from Missouri's nearby 'black belt.' That it never happened is almost beside the point." This is indeed revealing commentary on the psychology of a large number of frontier midwesterners. Yet one sees how Iowa's history is distinctive, a story of genuine human achievement. Freedom triumphed within a lifetime, as shown in the case of Reverend Asa Turner Jr., Iowa's first antislavery activist, who lived to see "what God and man had wrought."

This is an important contribution to the literature on African-American civil rights in the nineteenth century. Although the complexity will challenge the casual reader and the writing style may seem eccentric at times, *Bright Radical Star* is a thought-provoking book of multidimensional value, not the least of which is the questions it leads Minnesotans to ask about their state's history. Each state had a small black population, a farm economy, and a large white population that was an ethnic mix of western and northern Europeans. What was the impact of distance from the slave-holding South on race relations in Minnesota? Might we have shared Iowa's political legacy if Minnesota Territory had been governed by southerners? Did the timing of statehood in 1858, virtually on the eve of the Civil War and 11 years after Iowa joined the Union, somehow affect the white population's view of African Americans? In short, is our reputed racial tolerance well deserved, the result of circumstance, or the consequence of our own invention? The ultimate value of *Bright Radical Star* is in the questions it raises about our past and, therefore, about ourselves today.

Reviewed by William D. Green, *Ph.D., J.D., assistant professor of history and African American studies at Augsburg College, who also serves on the Minneapolis School Board. Among his articles on history, civil rights, education, and contemporary issues is a recent publication on an 1860 Minnesota slave case. He is currently working on a survey of civil-rights law in Minnesota from 1870 to 1890.*

Wanda Gág: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints.

By Audur H. Winnan.
(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993. 315 p. Cloth, $75.00.)

The rags-to-riches story of Wanda Gág, who was raised in New Ulm, educated in Minneapolis and New York, and achieved fame as America's pioneer of the children's picture book (*Millions of Cats*, 1927, followed by others), has been told, in part, before. But thanks to this catalogue raisonné, we now have much more information about her life and career as an artist between the world wars.

For years it was a hardscrabble existence for Gág: an off-and-on education at the Art Students League; a broken romance with her old Minnesota beau, Adolf Dehn, and the start of another with Earl Humphreys; years of frustrating work in advertising art; and the difficulties of taking care of her four youngest sisters. Then came the successes—exhibits of her drawings and lithographs at New York's premier print showcase, the Weyhe Gallery, in 1925, 1926, 1928, and 1930. And of course, there were the picture-book projects that in the 1930s consumed much of the time she wanted to devote to painting and printmaking. Author Winnan, a devoted collector of Gág's art, uses as her principal source the unpublished diaries from Gág's adult years, which were under lock and key at the University of Pennsylvania for 40 years following the artist's 1946 death from lung cancer. (Other diaries and letters are in the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., and New York and the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.) One of the strengths of this volume is Winnan's judicious editing of the long and extremely intimate handwritten diary entries. Key passages that shed light on Gág's art theory and technique and others dealing with the artist's love life are printed in a separate section.

The lengthy biographical essay is appreciative and uncritical. Winnan is not a trained art historian and mostly sticks to a year-by-year description of Gág's artistic and romantic activities in New York and at her country homes in Connecticut and New Jersey from 1920 to 1946. No attempt is made to apply new psychological-biographical or feminist methodology to understand this provocative artist. Nor does the author discuss in any subtle way Gág's connection to American art culture of this era—to the political and sexual revolution of Greenwich Village radicalism, to the streamlined, erotic, nature art of the 1920s Early Modernist movement, or to lithography as an ideological social force during the Great Depression. Without question, Wanda Gág was fiercely independent in many ways, but she was beholden to other artists and their ideas: to the men in her life, Adolf Dehn, Howard Cook, and Carl Zigrosser; to key American artists and writers such as Margaret Sanger, Floyd Dell, Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keefe, and Arthur Dove; and to the modern European artists she especially admired, including Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Franz Marc, and Henri Matisse.

When I first read these Gág diaries in 1987, I was struck by the intensity and complexity of the artist; she was, to lift a phrase from Kris Kristofferson, "a walking contradiction, partly truth, partly fiction." Often sweet and caring toward friends and family, she also frequently flashed a self-serving and vin-

dictive side. She resented that established New York artists and critics praised her book illustrations more than her lithographs, yet she continually expressed doubts about the worth of her "fine art." She was miserable that she could not (despite repeated attempts) master painting, which might have lifted her prestige in the eyes of the art world as it had for her old pal and nemesis, Dehn. Sexual fulfillment was an obsession, as the diaries graphically reveal; they show a woman torn between the desire to appear the vamp one minute and the virgin the next. Gág boasted that she had succeeded in joining her sexual desires to the undulating lines and swollen ovals of her intimate landscapes. Yet, in the end, her work may be tied closer to pantheistic notions than to erotic impulses.

To this writer, Wanda Gág stands out as a passionate and talented if not deeply original still-life printmaker (even her landscapes ended up as versions of still lives). She gave rapt attention to humble, homey objects—old lamps, spinning wheels, wooden stairs, antique sewing machines, and Franklin stoves, in addition to garden vegetables, pussy willows, and spruce trees—that reflected a romantic nostalgia for the rural values of the premodern handicraft age she was steeped in as a child in a tradition-rich Bohemian family in south-central Minnesota. Gág remained ill at ease with many of the realities of the twentieth century. Her art was impregnated with longing for an irretrievable golden age. All of this and more awaits fuller analysis from biographers and art historians. Audur Winnan and the Smithsonian Press have put together an important book. The technical analysis, documentary information, and photography are well done. This catalogue raisonné stands alongside others produced in the past decade on other Weyhe Gallery artists (Dehn, Cook, Paul Landacre, Donald Freeman). It will be the new starting point for future study of one of the most intriguing women of American culture.

Reviewed by Richard W. Cox, *professor of art history at Louisiana State University, who specializes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art. Author of "Adolf Dehn: The Life" in* The Prints of Adolf Dehn: A Catalogue Raisonné, *he is currently at work on a technical aesthetic analysis of Gág's art for the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque.*

Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880–1892.

By Jeffrey Ostler.
(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. 256 p. Cloth, $29.95.)

Prairie Populism should appeal to a wide range of readers. For those of us who like a good tale of political history, it delivers a thorough account of Gilded Age politics in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. For those who like to remind themselves that politics is dirty business—and has been for most of our nation's history—Ostler documents enough mudslinging and name-calling to make even Lee Atwater blush posthumously. And for readers concerned with third-party movements, particularly populism, the author makes several points worth considering.

Late-twentieth-century Americans suffer from confusion about the word populism. To some it means any political movement organized around an appeal to the "common people." For others it might mean an attempt by demagogues to rally working Americans around a right-wing cause. Some understand the term in its historic context and think of the late-nineteenth-century movement by farmers and workers to wrest justice from the emerging industrial order. Still others think of that plutocrat-populist, H. Ross Perot, and his own "third-party" movement in the last presidential election. For those of us puzzled by this slippery word, Ostler's book will provide some measure of clarity.

Prairie Populism enters into the venerable debate on American exceptionalism by posing a question: Why was there no populism (meaning a strong third-party vote) in Iowa? To answer this question, Ostler uses Kansas and Nebraska for comparative purposes. In an important part of the book, he demolishes the standard explanation that Kansas and Nebraska went Populist because of hard times, while in Iowa and other "eastern" states, more prosperous circumstances led to the rejection of third-party activity. Using convincing evidence that compares eastern Kansas and Nebraska to Iowa in terms of political, economic, and environmental conditions, Ostler shows that the "frontier" explanation has run its course. Instead, he offers an alternative explanation. "The crucial difference between Iowa and Kansas/Nebraska," he argues, "was party competition."

While Ostler does not claim that his findings for Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska hold true for the rest of the nation, he does attempt to shift the ground of Populist studies from the social to the political. "State political environments," he contends, "were crucial in determining whether agrarian radicalism took a third-party form." Ostler does not ignore the social dimensions of populism, and his book contains useful information on women, political education, and movement-building. But his most original contributions concern the development or absence of third-party movements. Iowa's active Farmers Alliance achieved important railroad legislation in 1888 without resorting to third-party tactics. This success by using nonpartisan pressure in a competitive political environment left many leaders within the state Farmers' Alliance opposed to third-party politics. By contrast, no amount of political pressure by the Kansas or Nebraska alliances could move those state legislatures, dominated by unchallenged Republican establishments, to reform on any issue. Thus, successful third parties were born.

Ostler's political narrative, combined with his excellent economic analysis, make for a convincing argument. I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in populism, rural history, or politics. But two questions, among many, arise from reading his study. First, how successful was the Iowa railroad legislation at meeting the demands of Alliance farmers? Ostler never answers this question. If he had looked to Minnesota for comparison, he would have found a "farmers" railroad bill, passed in 1885, that failed to meet Alliance demands. A resurgent Alliance came back in 1886 and 1890 to demand more reforms. Some analysis of the effects of the 1888 railroad law in Iowa would have strengthened his argument. Secondly, to what extent were fusion and third-party tactics used simultaneously in the same states? Again, Minnesota provides an interesting counterpoint. In 1890 the Minnesota Farmers' Alliance ran a full slate of candidates for state office as a third party, but at the local level, county alliances ran the gamut of options from straight fusion