

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Robert Bray

1984

What's Left to be Rediscovered?

Robert Bray, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_bray/26/

What's Left To Be Rediscovered? *

ROBERT BRAY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

BLOOMINGTON

One of the best ways to find out how much you don't know is to write a book and let your readers tell you. In the fall of 1982 I had the good fortune to publish with the University of Illinois Press a volume called *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois*. And ever since then—at conferences, through reviews and correspondence, even in the course of casual conversations—readers have been advising me of aspects of the Illinois literary heritage I never knew existed. Perhaps typical of such advice is this from a half-friendly reviewer writing in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. After duly noting the absence from *Rediscoveries* of Illinois' first published novel and earlier volume of verse, the reviewer commented that such "obscure titles would seem to be appropriate for a book that seeks to dust off important, neglected literary works."

Appropriate indeed. I have subsequently taken a peek at the verse of William Leggett (Edwardsville, 1822) and am convinced that his only literary virtue is being first. As for the "first novel written in the state," *Early Engagements* (Cincinnati, 1854), well, I can only say it's now on my list of Illinois books to be read. Yet, early Illinois imprints notwithstanding, *Rediscoveries* was not written as a compendium. It treats some few representative texts in detail, mentions a number more. The point was to favor a selection of literature (mostly novels) with an ample reading—works that I judged to have been *wrongly* neglected, such as Joseph Kirkland's important and entertaining novel *Zury* (1887). *Zury* is a notable instance of a readable book on a subject of genuine significance to Illinois (the romance of pioneering but, according to Kirkland, "realistically" treated) that has unaccountably dropped out of our cultural and historical consciousness. Oh, it's been kept alive in a custodial sort of way, receiving mentions under the rubric of "regionalism" in the comprehensive critical and historical surveys of American literature. But a niche in the bibliographies doesn't mean that Kirkland's chief work is much read. On the contrary, this sort of museum-display approach just about

* An essay version of a talk given at the first Illinois Literary Heritage Conference held in Springfield in November 1983.

guarantees that the literature of 19th century Illinois won't be read—except, of course, for the rare classic like *Spoon River Anthology*, which is kept alive in the classroom and in the Illinois mythology.

In the end, a *readership* was what I wanted for books like *Zury*. While no credit was due for “rediscovering” the books themselves—if nothing else the titles have never been lost—I did try to rediscover what they were about, how good they were as literature. In short, I read them. And as I read I asked myself whether there might be a classic “Illinois canon” sitting undisturbed on dusty library shelves, or hidden in the back corners of used and rare bookstores, or boxed up for the next garage sale. Could I do my little part to bring to light a worthy literary heritage that would give us—citizens and scholars alike—something more to talk about than Abraham Lincoln and the aforementioned *Spoon River*?

This was not a rhetorical question when I began reading for *Rediscoveries*, though it assuredly is now. For a couple of reasons, not all states have a distinctive literary heritage, by which I mean imaginative works written over time, consonant in matter and theme, which form a “usable past” for each new generation of writers and readers. *States*, we need to remember, are nothing more than culturally arbitrary geopolitical inventions: we don't feel any different when we cross the border between Illinois and Indiana, even when we're invited to sense the Hoosier vibrations by a welcoming sign. It's the *region* that has a cultural authenticity shared by both states—and others across the “Midwest,” which is itself an abstraction, empty as a social institution perhaps but far more palpably real as culture than a “state.” Nor is the criterion for a distinctive state literature to be found in “great historical events,” for every state has had its share of these, including even my much despised home state of Kansas. Kansas, so far as I can determine, utterly lacks a literary heritage in the sense I've been characterizing it, despite boasting powerful individual works and quantities of writing, old and new, about “bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s.

I cannot precisely say what constitutes a literary heritage, and the *why* of the matter—why we have one and Kansas doesn't—is much beyond my ability to answer. Yet I suspect it has everything to do with myth. In Illinois we have a myth that takes like a child's smallpox vaccination: an original infection that scars; a scar that grows and itches to remind us of a virulent past that is never wholly out of the blood generations later. In Illinois we imagine that our place has universal importance in its very particularity. “Things” happened “here”—in Chicago, in Springfield, in “Egypt”—that have left

their mark of inoculation. And we not only feel their vestige, we *recognize* what happened as history's version of what is. Consider but one example of handing down a myth, this from this life of a truly gigantic Illinoisan, Peter Cartwright. In Cartwright's *Autobiography* (1857) there is a delightful narrative nugget about a confrontation between the irrepressible preacher and Andrew Jackson. A service in Nashville in 1819 was unsettled by the appearance of the Hero of New Orleans, who, coming in late and not finding a seat, proceeded to lean against a post and listen to the exhortation. "Just then," Cartwright says,

I felt some one pull my coat into the stand, and turning my head, my fastidious preacher whispering a little loud, said: "General Jackson has come in; General Jackson has come in." I felt a flash of indignation run all over me like an electric shock, and facing about to my congregation, and purposely speaking out audibly, I said, "Who is General Jackson? If he don't get his soul converted, God will damn him as quick as he would a Guinea negro!"

Here are two of the 19th century American West's larger-than-life figures rubbing elbows (and rubbing each other the wrong way)—and to hear Cartwright tell it the tale is more than a little like a frontier brag. Jackson, of course, went on to become the quintessential western democrat and president of the United States. But what became of Peter Cartwright, who mastered General Jackson just as he mastered everyone else he came up against? Today, I suspect, few of us could say. But throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th Americans knew about Peter Cartwright. I have found this incident from the *Autobiography* repeated and embellished in two later pieces of Illinois literature, Francis Grierson's *The Valley of Shadows* (1909) and Harold Sinclair's *American Years* (1938). Grierson and Sinclair didn't have any compelling need for the vignette in their respective plots; they're simply reacting to Cartwright's indomitable spirit and in the process perpetuating the myth. Cartwright was local color, to be sure, and useful in any Illinois context. But he was more.

In *Rediscoveries* I devote several pages to *The Valley of Shadows*, which I think is one of the untarnishable literary treasures of our state. And I include a note on Sinclair's *American Years*. But, to my chagrin, I missed their common ancestor, Cartwright's *Autobiography*, which is like writing a commentary on the Gospels without having heard of Mark! The *Autobiography* is the mythic "Ur-text" for a century of subsequent writing, with both man and his work remaining vital to Illinois literature today. One of our finest contemporary poets, John Knoepfle, has written poetry based on the

Autobiography, and I am aware of two recent plays (both produced) that have Cartwright as their central character. So why the general unfamiliarity? It may sound absurd, but maybe we can blame it on Lincoln, whose pervasive mythic presence in Illinois (no debunking here!) has obscured all his peers (except perhaps for Stephen Douglas—and we all know what the Lincoln myth has done to *him!*). Cartwright, too, has suffered from this “Lincoln effect.” In the 1840s Peter Cartwright was *better known both in Illinois and across America* than Abraham Lincoln. He was the principal hero of Methodism’s age of saints on the western frontier, a successful politician in the Illinois legislature, a founder of towns and colleges, and an incomparable preacher wherever he went—and he went everywhere. As one newspaper put it in an 1970 retrospective, Cartwright was “greater than the king,” by which I assume they meant not greater than Christ but greater than the established political and churchly authority: Cartwright never became a bishop in the Methodist church, and Lincoln defeated him in a contest for the U.S. House. Yet, the article suggests, who did more for the culture, Bishop Whosit or Peter Cartwright? Abraham Lincoln or Peter Cartwright?

I realize the “blasphemy” in the question, but how interesting that it could be seriously raised in 1870. Not that this is an argument for reading the *Autobiography* today: the book must speak for itself, independently of dubious contemporary testimonials. And so it does. For me the *Autobiography* is a fine work, firmly in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and other unselfconscious American success stories. But you must judge for yourselves. Find a copy (which shouldn’t be too hard, since it was an enormously popular book in its day, widely circulated throughout the Methodist Book Concern), open it at random, and read a page or two. I’d be surprised if you stopped very soon. The *Autobiography* may lack conventional literary finish, but Cartwright had, like his vernacular descendent Mark Twain, one of America’s most inventive memories and the voice to go with it. The book was written while he was in semi-retirement at Pleasant Plains, intended, as its author says, to set the record straight: that is, to supplant the popular Cartwright mythology with something from the horses’ mouth. The result was a testament even more relentlessly mythic—and one of the few Illinois books that belongs to the nation.

Dwelling thus on a single volume of relatively unfamiliar autobiography should indicate that I think we’ve undervalued the patch-quilt of first-person non-fiction narratives about the settlement of Illinois—travel accounts, immigrant guides, diaries and journals, and (for lack of a better term) autobiographical romances. In an age of novel-reading we can reach back into the literary past

for kindred texts, cousins many times removed though they may be. And we'll read a bit of poetry, provided it's brought to our attention in an anthology and doesn't tax us with topicality or modernism. For instance, we have the competence to read the 1930s Sangamon Valley poems of "H." recently rediscovered by John Hallwas and published by Spoon River Poetry Press, or Dennis Camps's new edition of Vachel Lindsay (also from Spoon River). And, as practiced readers of fiction, we've the curiosity to wade through even so egregious a novel as Clark Kerr's *The Illini*. But we don't really know how to approach the various kinds of non-fiction prose that were so prolifically written (and so popular received) between 1820 and the Civil War. This was the first literature of Illinois, the literature that made the rest. Yet faced with a book like Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land* (1946), seemingly so formless and "all over the place," we are likely to give in to a temptation to "piece" on it—a passage here, a chapter there, but no reading straight through and consequently no sense of the work as a whole.

This is precisely what has happened to Farnham and others over the years. Every so often an anthology will pick up a pungent chapter on frontier manners from *Life in Prairie Land* or a rattling good pioneer adventure—say a prairie fire or an Indian escapade—from another eyewitness narrative. Then for the life of the anthology these bits have to stand for their entire books, which, however good the extracts, is a literary disgrace. I would argue that there are important reasons *not* to anthologize but to reprint wholly. First, books obviously are wholes and the tendency to violate their integrity is the lowest form of a "social studies" approach to literature. But in the case of books like Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land*, Christiana Holmes Tillson's *A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois* (1872), or Rebecca Burlend's *A True Picture of Emigration* (1848), an even better reason comes to mind: these books are informed by women's voices and we need—especially now—to hear them uninterrupted.

Of course women's pioneering stories give a different perspective on the westering experience. How could it be otherwise? But the formal role of *voice* goes much deeper than perspective. Farnham is preoccupied with the romantic western landscape, Tillson with frontier manners, Burlend with the vexing difficulties of emigration. Yet all three writers use women's work, women's place, and women's consciousness to make narratives of impressive authority—narratives that, even as they pay their respects to the western vastness, turn inward to a private work of critical feeling: not only what they did on the Illinois frontier but what it was like and, therefore, what it meant.

If this sounds similar to what went on with women's fiction in the 1970s, then I've made my point. The great silence concerning the

emotions of pioneering—especially anxiety, which seems to have been constant and deep-seated—is broken, and we are able to see the adventure as *more* heroic rather than less. Stories of pioneer women are more heroic because more human: there was more to be transcended than nature and the empty land. I wish there were space here for large quotation, enough to characterize voice and suggest form. But once again I must ask you to take my word until you can find the books themselves (this time the quest will be hard: of the three, only *Life in Prairie Land* is in print—a library edition—and *A Women's Story* and *A True Picture* have been unavailable since they were reprinted in the Lakeside Classics series in 1919 and 1936 respectfully). To read them you'll have to pester your local library for an inter-library loan or visit a university research library—and even then you may not find all three.

I have chosen to talk about these three works in particular because I believe they are “Illinois classics” that have been overlooked and deserve much wider reading and discussion. There are many authors in this “first-person non-fiction” category, to be sure, all waiting to be rediscovered, and I don't mean to imply that all the worthy ones were written by women. Yet in the main these books *were* the province of women: in 19th century America women *could* write, both in the sense of being able to do so and being sanctioned to do so by society. Farnham's book, in fact, has enough sentimental and romantic fictionalizing in it to qualify the author as one of Hawthorne's “damn'd tribe of scribbling women.” Yet I don't think that even such a discontented belles-lettrist as Hawthorne could object to Farnham's *authenticity*, that quality of having been there—been there and left, it's important to add. For all three women got part of their perspective on Illinois pioneerism by leaving the state and returning to civilization: Farnham to New York, Tillson to Massachusetts, and Burlend to Yorkshire in England.

The books are no less “Illinois” for the author's having left, however. Their years in Illinois were a lifetime because they were the right years to be here. Looking back, Christiana Tillson tended to be satiric about the “Suckers” she encountered (to her mind, only southerners were “Suckers,” never Illinoisans from New England stock); Rebecca Burlend was even more severe about the country and its folk. And both women are convincing in the indictments. Yet after all it is neither Tillson's human comedy nor Burlend's bleak agrarian prospect that holds us the longest. In the end we want to listen to Eliza Farnham's prophetic vision of Illinois:

But we are departing from prairie land! The bright waters of Lake Michigan dance around our steamer. Blue and dim in the

distance, fades the mellow-tinted shore, its long faint outline trembling in the golden haze of Indian summer! Farewell! land of majestic rivers and flowering plains—of fearful storms and genial sunshine—of strong life and glowing beauty! Glorious in thy youth—great in thy maturity—mighty in thy age—thou shalt yet rival the eastern lands of heroism and song, in the worship and affection of man! Thy free plains and far-reaching streams shall be the theatre of a power and intelligence never yet witnessed! Thy countless acres shall glow with checkered beauty and hum with busy life, when the generations of those who love thee now, sleep in thy peaceful bosom! Land of the silent past and stirring future, farewell!

Did this Illinois apocalypse come to pass? Well, yes and no. Our acres do indeed “glow with checkered beauty and hum with busy life,” but these days they are hardly “countless.” And, in an ironic inversion of Farnham, we now tend to think of Illinois as the land of a stirring past and a silent future. In a sense the myth of a heroic past has been too persistent, our own recent history too anxious to let us do otherwise. I speak personally here. For me, ultimately, Farnham’s “prairie land,” though an imaginary and mythic place, is the only kind of Illinois worth possessing. And this is the crucial importance of Illinois literature—or the literature of any place you happen to live. So what’s left out there to rediscover? In a country of the mind there are always “countless acres” for “the theatre of a power and intelligence never yet witnessed.” And I hope I’ve suggested how many literary ghost towns still await our rehabilitation in the vast imaginary country called Illinois.