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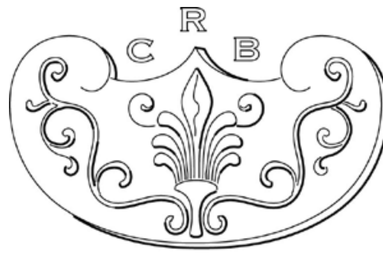

Book Review by Wilfred M. McClay

Deep States

The Good Country: A History of the American Midwest, 1800–1900, by Jon K. Lauck.
University of Oklahoma Press, 366 pages, $65 (cloth), $26.95 (paper)

The French have a term for the vast interior of the North American continent lying between the Alleghenies and the Sierras: *l'Amérique profonde*. Its meaning is variable, although tending toward a casual Gallic dismissiveness that seems to be obligatory. In other words, the modifier *profonde*, deep, is usually meant ironically. But it also conveys the sense that there is a real America beyond the coastal encampments, something not merely provincial but dark, shapeless, vast, and unknown. Perhaps even "deep," in some primitive way. Although still probably not worth knowing any better than that—not really.

The sense being described here is akin to that of Saul Steinberg's depiction of America west of the Hudson in a classic cover for *The New Yorker* (March 1976) called "View of the World from Ninth Avenue." You know the one I mean, in which the bottom two thirds render in great detail the humming life of the West Side of Manhattan, while the rest of America is depicted in the remaining third as a three-block-wide green rectangle, flat as a cement floor, bordered by white slivers called "Canada" and "Mexico," with a few rock formations and a handful of city and state names thrown in to break up the monotony. Steinberg was both mocking and celebrating New Yorkers' sophisticated provincialism, and the illustration's immense popularity ever since bears witness to that perspective's enduring appeal. (As the song says, it's a hell of a town.)

Sectionalism has been one of the great themes of American history, and the interplay among America's urban, rural, and regional cultures has long been one of the most interesting factors in our national life. But the flattening and homogenization of the country over the course of the 20th century has rendered this aspect of our national life less and less visible, and hence less vibrant. The steady decline of genuinely independent regional and local newspapers and other news outlets is but one sign of this loss. Another is the fading interest in savoring the particularities of place: history, geography, culture, food, climate, local business, anything that distinguishes one locale from another.

No section of the country has suffered more from this process of national homogenization and stereotyping than the Midwest, as Jon K. Lauck well knows. An adjunct professor of history and political science at the University of South Dakota, he is the founding president of the Midwestern History Association and the editor of the *Middle West Review*, a journal dedicated to the study of the American Midwest. In addition, he is the author of several books, including *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (2013), *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965* (2017), and his latest, *The Good Country: A History of the American Midwest, 1800–1900*.

Over a century ago, well before the onset of economic woes that caused the region to decline in recent years, the Midwest found itself on the receiving end of a steady flow of cultural disdain, whose principal target was that characteristic Midwestern settlement, the small town. "The Revolt from the Village" was the name given this literary and cultural moment by Carl Van Doren in his 1921 study, *The American Novel*, and examples of his thesis were plentiful and close at hand. Edgar Lee Masters's 1915 book, *Spoon River Anthology*, a collection of autobiographical epitaphs from a small-town cemetery, evoked the acrid hypocrisy and repression of the small-town environment. Similarly, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) sought to uncover what Van Doren called the "buried and pitiful" lives of its inhabitants. Ernest Hemingway complained of his childhood home, Oak Park, Illinois, that it was a place with "broad lawns and narrow minds."

But the master of the genre was Sinclair Lewis, America's first Nobel Laureate in Lit-

Chromolithograph published 1873 by the Grange, a social organization promoting agriculture.

erature, whose *Main Street* (1920) depicted the life of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, in bitterly mocking tones:

> This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.
>
> The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota." But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere….
>
> Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.
>
> Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Two additional facts: *Main Street* was the bestselling work of fiction in the United States in 1921. It also was banned at the public library of Alexandria, Minnesota.

I don't know how well Lewis's rather snide criticisms play for us in the present moment. Perhaps it sounded fresh in its day; to me it sounds like the work of a precocious adolescent, culled from the pages of a high school literary magazine. Even the writing is not very good; Lewis can't seem to decide whether he wants to speak with the voice of the town or with the voice of the author that stands in judgment of the town. It's hard to dispute that, given the appalling moral squalor of our present culture, Lewis's ungenerous depictions of the foibles of small-town Midwestern life no longer seem very compelling. They seem…small.

But they have left their mark. Just as our understanding of the Victorian era was shaped decisively by its chief detractors, not least among them the Bloomsbury deadbeat Lytton Strachey in his acidulous book *Eminent Victorians* (1918), so our impressions of the American Midwest are heavily indebted to these rebellious native sons—for every one of the American names I've cited, including Van Doren (who grew up in Hope, Illinois), was a Midwesterner by birth and rearing. Verily, if one had the benefit only of their testimony, and no other information, one could readily consent to thinking of the Midwest as one large prison, worthy of nothing better than being escaped from and then flown over.

But there have always been other voices, even if they were often inaudible. There were voices like that of the author Hamlin Garland in his unsentimental but lovingly realistic accounts of the hardship of prairie life. Or the wonderfully histrionic poet Vachel Lindsay, a son of Springfield and an American original, who declaimed, "Would I might rouse Lincoln in you all." Or the splendid novelist Willa Cather, whose work swelled with affection for the plains in which she grew up. Or the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, who called his native Midwest "the warm center of the world."

Consider Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), from which that phrase is taken. It is an iconic novel, probably the most-read book in the American literary canon today, a work that is almost entirely about miserable displaced Midwesterners who find themselves lost in the moral confusion of 1920s New York. Why does that book conclude with Nick Carraway's poignant invocation of "his" Midwest?

> [N]ot the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns but the thrilling, returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name.

Nick's decision to leave the jungle-like insanity of New York and return home to the bracing moral solidity of Minnesota comes across to us as an act of spiritual renewal, a fresh restart, a return to the foundations of things. Was this just an expression of self-indulgent sentimentalism on Fitzgerald's part? Or was he pointing toward a different side of the Midwest, a civilized settledness and capacity for democratic earnestness and fellowship and—as Wisconsin's German settlers might say—*Gemütlichkeit* (friendliness) that the bitterness of writers like Lewis and Masters had failed to appreciate, or even acknowledge?

The Good Country wants us to embrace the second of those options, and the case it makes for doing so is both powerful and persuasive. This superb book is also an important contribution to American history, not least because it is consciously part of a larger project, a restoration of balance in our understanding of our nation's past. "It is past time," Lauck says, "for a great correction in the field of American history…[a] rebalancing of what we think we know" that can "provide hope from the past to those who seek democratic progress in the present."

It is a measure of our current unbalanced times that even the book's title will be found immediately unacceptable by the armies of Madame Defarges who monitor such things, and even the unsuspecting reader may find himself made a little nervous by it. But there is no reason for such nervousness. Lauck pays attention to the region's failings and the injustices experienced by the marginalized in its social order. His claims are made on behalf of a good land, not a perfect one.

But something does not have to be perfect for it to be admirable and worthy. Otherwise, nothing could be admirable and nothing worthy. Besides, Lauck is already contending for the marginalized simply by defending the Midwest. "By looking with fresh eyes at the history of the American Midwest, the most historically neglected region in the United States," he contends, "we can begin to see elements of American history that have nearly vanished from the main currents of historical work in recent decades."

The book is massively researched, with source notes taking up nearly 40% of it, and it brims over with particular instances and individuals to support its claims. Yet despite the immense amount of detail it is eminently readable, often delightful, and its overall thesis is clear: the American Midwest during its prime was the most democratically advanced place in the world, with a civic culture that prized education, literature, libraries, and the arts, and sought to distribute an awareness and appreciation of them as widely as possible. It developed a "common democratic culture" in which "Christianity, republican law and order, market culture, civic obligation, and a midwestern-modified gentility of manner largely prevailed."

The book works its way through an American version of the long 19th century, from the time of the American Revolution to the turn into the 20th century, stopping short of the Spanish-American War, which would begin to usher in a different era for America and for the Midwest. Thus, the book's subject matter is only a slice of Midwestern history, and does not deal either with the soaring heights of the region's industrial wealth and power in the first half of the 20th century or its sad decline in the second half, as cities like Detroit and Youngstown lost the industrial base that had made them success-

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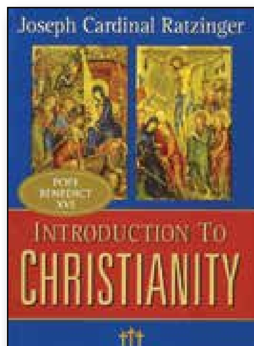

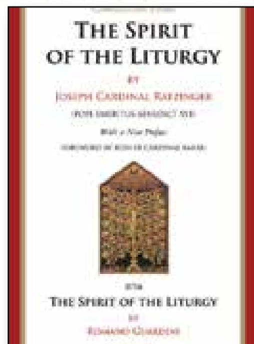

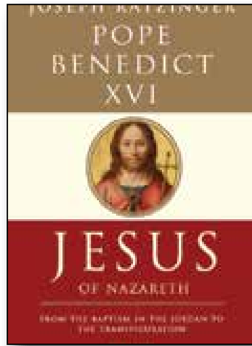

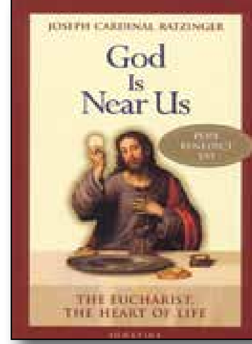

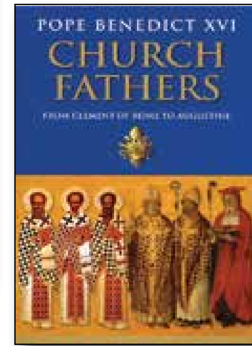

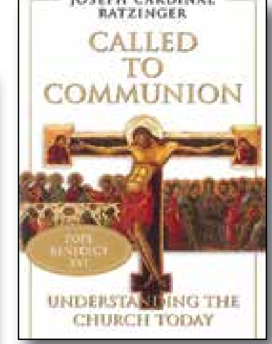

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ful and crumbled into their present sad state. Instead, he wants to revive a keener sense of just what an exceptional place the earlier Midwest was, a "great agrarian civilization," in the words of Allan Carlson, or as Lauck likes to call it, the "old square world," a world in which idealism was high and there was "little of modernity's corrosive cynicism."

One could see the beginnings of that Midwestern idealism in the great Northwest Ordinance, the finest achievement of the Articles of Confederation, outlawing slavery and primogeniture, establishing fee simple land ownership, encouraging the widest possible development of educational institutions, affirming freedom of religion and emphasizing its importance to society, and establishing procedures to ensure an orderly expansion of the nation, in which newly admitted states would be added on an equal footing with the states they were joining. It included an enumeration of fundamental rights so complete that one historian called it "a checklist of republican virtues, with precedent going all the way back to the Magna Carta of 1215." The Northwest Ordinance is often regarded as a prologue to the Constitution and Bill of Rights, but it also can be regarded as the Midwestern region's first act of self-definition.

Lauck goes on in subsequent chapters to detail the development of schools, libraries, and civic institutions, and the emergence of a culture of democracy that affirmed the common man and promoted self-improvement, entrepreneurial effort, and moderate social reforms. He contrasts that culture, to good effect, with the developing culture of the South, in which cultural hierarchy, very much including slavery, reigned, and the planter ideal stressed values that "were frankly old world and sometimes even feudal in origin and tone." One can understand why the Midwest would be particularly vehement in its opposition to slavery, and would prove to be a breeding ground for abolitionist sentiment, particularly arising out of the multitudinous small religious colleges emerging in Ohio (where Oberlin College would be an outstanding example) and other states. It also helps explain the enthusiasm for the Union cause in the Civil War that led 80% of the male student body of my college, Hillsdale, to march off to war. (I had to specify "male" students, because Hillsdale admitted women, something very Midwestern of them, and an example that the Ivy League schools did not see fit to follow until more than a century later. Hillsdale also admitted black men and women from its beginnings.)

Lauck also treats the region's reform history in the latter part of the 19th century, in a chapter called "The Midwest and the Age of Mild Reform." The sentiment for reform was strong and found fertile soil in the Midwest, but it never expressed itself in extreme or anarchical ways. As Ray Stannard Baker, a Chicago writer often labeled a "muckraker," put it, "We muckraked not because we hated our world but because we loved it. We were not hopeless, we were not cynical, we were not bitter…we were far more eager to understand and make sure than to dream of utopias." The reform impulse was not driven by revolutionary Marxian class consciousness but by the region's particular penchant for moderation and gradual self-improvement, grounded in the centrality of "Christianity, personal character, small farms, small businesses, main streets, and old-style professions.

Lauck concludes with a lament, that the inordinate influence of Carl Van Doren and an assorted group of writers and intellectuals who followed in a similar track have caused us to "lose sight of the Midwest and what it was." He cites NPR personality Terry Gross as exemplifying the conventional wisdom of the current *bien-pensant* about the stultifying effects of small-town Midwestern life. Of course, National Public Radio was also, for many years, the home address of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, a fictional but not unreal radio evocation of one outpost of Allan Carlson's agrarian civilization. It would not be wrong, I think, to connect the potential of this wonderful, revelatory book with the success of Keillor's charming, memorable program. Too bad that NPR doesn't have anything like it now. Too bad that Keillor himself has been canceled by the forces of un-mild reform, something that would be unlikely to happen to him in Lake Wobegone.

But there can be virtue in evoking something worthy in the past, and that is what Jon Lauck's *The Good Country* is all about. "The old Midwest could be a reservoir of idealism and hope," he concludes, "if we knew its history." Yes, and it is not merely nostalgia that makes him say this, and makes his saying it something to which we should listen. For the old Midwest was a place animated by the belief that a self-governing republic, upheld by the sturdy virtues of a generous, courageous, thoughtful, and self-reliant citizenry, is the best regime for man, and that its success is the best possible source of moral and political inspiration for the world. We need that example now more than ever.

Wilfred M. McClay is the Victor Davis Hanson Chair of Classical History and Western Civilization at Hillsdale College, and author, most recently, of Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story *(Encounter Books).*

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