

Thomas Fox Averill

A PERSONAL READING OF THE LITERATURE OF DOUGLAS COUNTY, LAWRENCE, AND THE
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

"Lawrence! No Kansas pioneer is disturbed by any doubt as to what's in a name. Truly that was a name to conjure with, a name to be loved, a name worthy of a man's best thought and warmest heart's blood."

--W.R. Lighton, SONS OF STRENGTH,

Literature is not history. It is the lie about a place, or the place re-shaped. Even more, it is the legend, the myth of a certain place. In Kansas literature, no place contains more legend, is more a place of myth, is larger than life, than Lawrence. Douglas County, Lawrence and KU combine three important myths that pump in the heart's blood of Kansas and, in fact, the United States: that we are a pastoral country of sturdy, democratic yeomen; that racial and ethnic equality is possible and even a source of our strength; that we believe fundamentally in the rights of individuals, the minority within the majority. Let me give some examples of these beliefs in our literature.

Helen Rhoda Hoopes, a long-time Lawrence resident and KU Assistant Professor of English, conjures the pastoral myth of Douglas County and its people in "Winter Twilight on the Victory Highway":

The mellow concave of the sky rests its pale apricot brim
On the brown edges of the Kansas prairie.
Venus and Jupiter, two distant crumbs of light,
Cling to its cerulean surface.
Twilight smudges the nearer fields
Where snow lies white in patches.
The dry cornstalks solemnly mark time
In long rustling rows
Up and over the curve of the hill
In the west seven acres.

. . .
. . . in the little house . . .
They are young and very strong.
There is good food in the pantry, and plenty of sweet hay in the big barn.
In the spring the redbud will blossom;
The pasture will be green again.
The fields must be harrowed and planted.
They will plant potatoes and beans, and put new shingles on the house.
The meadowlark will whistle in the stillness,
and in the barnyard
Buff Orpingtons will clatter over their yellow corn.

This lush landscape, these strong people appear again and again in the work of poets like Willard Wattles, Paul Kahn, Victor Contoski, and Esther M. Clark, as well as in the many novels set in the rural Douglas County of territorial homesteading.

Other writers, including Harry Kemp (tramp-poet who came to Lawrence to attend KU in 1907), Margaret Lynn, Margaret Hill McCarter, Leonard Nathan, Florence Snow, Richard Realf, and Kenneth Irby, evoke the territorial Lawrence of Charles and Sarah Robinson, James Lane, the Eldridge Hotel, Quantrill, the Underground Railroad, Blue Mound. They show the Lawrence settled by radical New Englanders, the abolitionists, and free-staters made larger than life by the tumultuous historical events around them:

We cross the prairies as of old
The pilgrims crossed the sea,
To make the West, as they the East
The homestead of the free.

--John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Song of the Kansas Emigrant"

Abolition fascinates the historical novelists who write of territorial Kansas--but it also haunts the later, more cynical writers, like Harry Kemp, who see the dream of abolition and racial equality die into the segregated "bottoms" of a town unable to live up to its past:

At the time of the slavery agitation its citizens had encouraged the negroes to escape, had petted them, idealised them . . .

Now, the great negro population, at first so encouraged, was crowded into a festering multitude of dilapidated buildings that stood on the flats close by the region where the river coiled through level acres of low-lying country.

--Harry Kemp, TRAMPING ON LIFE

A more recent writer, Evan S. Connell, Jr., who attended the University of Kansas from 1945 to 1947 uses Lawrence as a symbol of personal freedom and of education--spiritual, intellectual and sexual. Other writers, such as William Inge, Joseph Stanley Pennell, Frank Harris, Robert Day, James Gunn, and, again, Harry Kemp, present a similarly complex fusing of education and freedom. Connell's description of an art class learning anatomy in Davenport (Lawrence) provides an example. The art teacher, Andraukov, tries to give his students a purer, artistic, unqueamish sense of the human body by using a live model and asking his class about breasts:

Andraukov . . . carefully licked the under side of his mustache and pushed the cigarette deeper into his mouth. His knuckles were yellow and hard as stone. From the town of Davenport the sound of automobile horns came faintly up to the university hills; but for these noises and the creak of the instructor's shoes the life studio was quiet.

Logan Zahn was a thin, heavily bearded young man who sat in corners whenever possible. He was older than the other students and wore glasses so thick that his eyes seemed to bulge. There were rumors that he was writing a book about something.

Zahn and the model looked at each other, both expressionless.

"You will tell instructor amount of angle. The left breast now, to where it is looking?"

"At the print of Cezanne's apples on the wall."

"And the right?"

Logan Zahn was not afraid. He pointed out the window. "At the Episcopal church."

Education is often sexual, as well as mental and spiritual: the breast staring at the Episcopal church. Yet there is a link here with the earlier literature.

Our literature explores the cultural issue of sex and the breaking of puritanical and Victorian sexual mores, just as it explores racial and economic issues. After all, many Kansas writers attended the University of Kansas, and came from small Kansas towns--Inge from Independence, Wattles from Baynesville, Pennell from Junction City, Irby from Fort Scott. For these writer, Lawrence perhaps represented academic, personal and sometimes sexual freedom, a life unfettered by the small talk and small-mindedness of their home communities.

Another Kansas writer used historical legend to show our roots in freedom. In his poem, "Harvest: June 1938," Kenneth Porter wrote a poem for Donald Henry and Ray Jackson, Jr., two KU students who became aware of rising fascism in Spain in the 1930s and enlisted, along with other students, to fight in the Spanish Civil War. There was great outcry from the parents of these KU students who accused the university of brainwashing them, changing them too radically from the fine children they had once been. But Kenneth Porter points out that Lawrence and Kansas were founded in radicalism:

Donald Henry
Ray Jackson
They were Kansans
their schoolbooks had not yet forgotten
John Brown
They were men from the wheatfields
Spain was a furious sun which drew them along paths of light
as the water ascends from the trickle through sand, from the buffalo-
wallow,
to swoop like a billion bright chatos which speed to relief
of the drought-besieged fields,
Theirs too was a lean and stubborn land.
For five years it had known
the dictatorship of the drought, then blackshirted dust-storms . . .
the dust still swirls in a gas-cloud,
heads have fallen. . . .
but the lines hold. . . .
irrigation-canals have brought up reinforcements. . . .

John Brown of Kansas Still goes marching on--
his tread is on the plains of Aragon!

Thus Kenneth Porter speaks for the infusion of the radical past into the present. And in Kansas, Lawrence and KU represent that radicalism.

Reviewing how Kansas writers have used the historical and cultural myths of Lawrence and KU has revealed to me some of my own impulses and feelings about the place. I grew up in Topeka, but was attracted to Lawrence as a liberating ~~place~~ ^{town} where I could get away from everyone who knew me. Like a free-stater, I could start fresh on the world in a new territory. I came to the university in the late 1960s, when another political radicalism was sweeping the nation. Lawrence, as it had been in 1854, was the place to be in Kansas, and I am glad that I was at this freest place, glad that I was part of a strain of radicalism running throughout Lawrence and KU history. Kansas University students, along with university students and concerned citizens all over the country, brought down a political power--Lyndon Baines Johnson--and finally helped convince the nation of both the futility and immorality of the Viet Nam War. Significantly, this happened most vociferously in Kansas in the same place where abolitionists had come years earlier to fight the immorality of slavery.

Lawrence poet Kenneth Irby makes this point well in his poem "To Max Douglas," where he connects radical hippies and radical abolitionists, both facing the violence of a new territory:

The woods around Osawatomie
are as wild, the thickets
on Potawatomie Creek just
as dense and matted beard
as John Brown's sons' farms

John Brown's grimeyed cutlass hacking massacre
a hundred years? anyone with sense would still
be scared shitless to go out there on foot at night
high, and knowing what we do?
the underground railway now
is dope not slaves, runaways
of revolution, nutcrackers, unshacklers
of deep spirits
the dark gods
wait in the blooded underground
their visage is more shapeless
and more terrible than ever.

In the 1970s, I spent three years living on a Douglas County farm, raising animals, gardening, living in the landscape, and, in my spare time, going to graduate school. There, I first became interested in local literature, in Kansas writers and how they created literature by combining the land with the idea of the land, and the history with the myth of place. My reading of that literature tells me that Lawrence, KU and Douglas County, because of the richness of both land and history, because of the tension created by myth and its opposite, an anti-myth (the inability to live up to a myth) have been the setting for more Kansas literature than probably any other place in the state--with the possible exception of the romanticized Dodge City.

The myth and anti-myth Kansas writers see in Lawrence and Douglas County, then, lies first in the pastoral land itself, where people can make a fine living, transplant their ideas and their civilization onto a beautiful, hospitable landscape; second, in the radicalism of abolition and free-state politics transplanted onto that landscape; finally, in a university sprouting from the fertile soil, encouraging a fertility of individual intellectual and sexual freedom. And there is also disappointment. The myth shows Lawrence as a bulwark of racial liberation. The anti-myth is a segregated small town. The myth shows Lawrence as a place of intellectual freedom. The anti-myth is a place where those interested in international and national politics are seen as brainwashed by their professors and by radical student leaders. The myth shows the open, beautiful, liberating Douglas County landscape. The anti-myth is a county drowned by a lake, slashed by a superhighway, pocked by development. Or, as poet Paul Kahn laments:

At the head
of every stream there is a dump.
Glass, metal, grey warped wood.
Maybe they think if they put it there it will
go away.

These disappointment are strong in Lawrence and Douglas County literature exactly because the myths about the place are so strong. This tension between the myth and the disappointment is exactly ~~what~~ ^{what} makes Lawrence such grand territory for the writer, whose literary work always needs tension and conflict as its primary ingredient.

Finally, it is the legend and the disappointment, remembered by our past and conjured by our writers, that defines us. It is what so many Kansas writers have used as a basis for their Kansas literature. I have in mine, and some of my first efforts were written in Lawrence, set in Lawrence, and published in Lawrence, by ~~the~~ COTTONWOOD REVIEW. So was the work of many of the contemporary writers I've mentioned in this reading of our literature. We writers will continue to conjure with Lawrence, with the University, with Douglas County,

for it is important Kansas territory, which, examined, will tell us who we are. The Kansas poet William Stafford, who lived in Lawrence for a number of years, sums it up in his poem "Bi-Focal":

So, the world happens twice--
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is.

Thomas Fox Averill lives in Topeka with his wife, Jeffrey Ann Goudie, and his three-year-old daughter Eleanor Goudie-Averill. He teaches creative writing and Kansas literature at Washburn University, and spends his extra time writing, running and keeping in touch with other Kansas writers. His first collection of short stories, PASSES AT THE MOON, has just been published by The Woodley Press.

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