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Review of *The Broidered Garment: The Love Story of Mona Martinsen and John G. Neihardt*, by Hilda Martinsen Neihardt

Timothy G. Anderson

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, tanderson5@unlnotes.unl.edu

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The Broidered Garment: The Love Story of Mona Martinsen and John G. Neihardt. By Hilda Martinsen Neihardt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. x + 303 pp. Illustrations, bibliography. \$29.95.

In 1907, John G. Neihardt published *A Bundle of Myrrh*, his first volume of lyric poetry, thirty-three poems of often frank sexuality and longing. Reviewers found the book daring—the *New York Times* noted its “riotous joy of the flesh”—and occasionally crude. But it won Neihardt the ultimate rave review when it was read by a young American sculptress then studying with Auguste Rodin in Paris. When twenty-three-year-old Mona Martinsen read the poems, she was moved to write to the twenty-six-year-old Nebraska poet, beginning a correspondence that would culminate in a marriage proposal. In November 1908, when Mona Martinsen stepped off a train in Omaha, she was met by Neihardt, a marriage license in his pocket. When she died, in 1958, the Neihardts were just months away from celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

It is this charming love story that Hilda Martinsen Neihardt, their daughter, tells in *The Broidered Garment*. And she tells it, not as history or biography, but as a family story. As such, she relates the family history—first the Martinsen side, then the Neihardt side, then, finally, the account of John and Mona—as a grandparent might tell it to the grandchildren. She cites few sources and creates whole conversations she could not possibly have heard; what she tells us is, to a large extent, what she heard as a child from her parents and grandparents, using what she calls her “sympathetic imagination” to round out the tales.

The Martinsen family story will be the least well known to Neihardt fans. But coming first and being, by far, the longest section, it delays too long the book’s central focus: the Neihardts’ love story. The center section, Neihardt family history, is the shortest, and readers familiar with John Neihardt’s own two volumes of autobiography, *All Is But a Beginning* (1972) and *Patterns and*

Coincidences (1978) will recognize many of the stories here.

It is in the third section, “The Couple,” that the author’s approach pays off. Again, fans will recognize portions, but here, clearly, Hilda Neihardt is supplementing familiar anecdotes with her own observations and with stories she heard around her parents’ kitchen table as a child. Having spent years as the valiant custodian of her father’s legacy, she tells the tale not only of the writer who would become the poet laureate of Nebraska but also of a sculptor who essentially gave up her art for his, a woman who, raised in fine homes in New York and Germany, moved to tiny Bancroft, Nebraska, to join not only a new husband but also a forceful mother-in-law. It is a story—of making not only poetry but also a home and a family—that Hilda Neihardt, who died as she finished the book, relates with warmth and feeling.

TIMOTHY G. ANDERSON
College of Journalism and
Mass Communications
University of Nebraska–Lincoln