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Review of Home Town News: William Allen White & The Emporia Gazette

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Home Town News: William Allen White & The Emporia Gazette. By Sally Foreman Griffith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Photographs, notes, index. viii + 291 pp. \$24.95.

Sally Foreman Griffith uses the life of William Allen White, noted editor of *The Emporia Gazette*, as the vehicle for an insightful examination into the "role of journalism in American culture." Acknowledging that her book is a biography, Griffith nevertheless makes clear that she uses White's career "as a window, or perhaps . . . a prism to observe the communication process as a complex interaction among communicator, audience, and medium, involving many different facets, including the psychological, social, cultural, economic, technological, and political." Put more simply, Griffith gives us a fascinating look into small-town (Emporia, Kansas) America and the forces that shaped its values into an enduring archetype in American culture.

As every good biography must, the book chronologically follows White's activities, beginning with his early education and his newspaper work before he purchased *The Emporia Gazette*. We follow his early struggles as a young editor, and we see clearly his evolving grasp of his role as an editor and that role's influence and function within the community. Finally, we see White's departure, in a sense, from the community as he becomes a nationally noted spokesman for progressivism. Griffith rightly concludes that White's importance as an involved shaper of small-town values was mostly over by the 1920s and there, except for a page and half epilogue, she ends her biography. Griffith sees the 1920s as the end of an era. The rise of mass media brought changes in the design and purpose of small-town newspapers. Griffith writes that "Emporians could no longer gain the impression from reading their local newspaper that Emporia—or their own lives—mattered much in the scheme of things."

However, as every good biography does not, Griffith gives us a compelling look back (if one

is old enough, the view evokes nostalgia) at that peculiarly small-town mix of attitudes, morals, and politics that made life in small-town America so distinctly different from urban life. We hear about the town's outrage when a philandering doctor ignores the community's moral code, we learn about the on-going economic battle to keep Emporia shoppers in Emporia, and we are treated to an insider's view of the influence politics has on all facets of small-town life. Griffith is also mindful that she balance White's "celebration of community" with the truth of its limitations—business and businessmen first, unequal treatment for the less privileged, and the suppression of dissent.

Giving both a convincing measure of an era and a measure of a man is truly an ambitious task. Sally Foreman Griffith does so with both skill and style.

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