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Review of Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States

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Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States. Edited by James H. Madison. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. Maps, index. vi + 308 pp. \$29.95.

Twelve authors, one per state, working independently of one another, assigned the common task of compressing their state's history, culture, politics, and geography into a single, brief essay—it could be a formula for disaster, but under the able, guiding hand of historian James H. Madison it turns out to be a successful achievement. *Heartland* is an enjoyable book, informative without making claims of authority, less comparative than its subtitle promises, but relentlessly sincere in presenting the diversity of pasts that collectively form a regional history of the Middle West.

Choosing states as the subjects for study (rather than time periods, topics, or regions) facilitates capsule political histories, which all of the authors include and which are easily the strongest feature of the book, but it leads to endless recitations of the diversity of physical

environments included within twelve states that span no more than four distinct physical regions. Madison apparently chose to arrange the essays in alphabetical order of the authors' last names, hence the book begins with Annette Atkins' sprightly account of what it means to be a Minnesotan and ends with Dorothy Schwieder's overview of Iowa. This effectively random ordering, while offering a heartwarming display of midwestern democracy in action, atomizes any sense of spatial or temporal continuity between the states and unduly emphasizes uniqueness. Only Frederick Luebke's essay on Nebraska makes a serious attempt at comparison with other states, first by defining the comparative approach and then by successfully using it to show how Nebraska's history differs and compares with that of other states.

The authors choose a variety of strategies for their narratives. Atkins' essay on Minnesota, "Left of Center and Out of Place," attempts to locate that state in the national mosaic, as does Peter Harstad's chapter on Indiana. R. Douglas Hurt (Ohio), Leo Oliva (Kansas), Martha Mitchell Bigelow (Michigan), John D. Bunker (Wisconsin), and Cullom Davis (Illinois) offer straightforward, factual summaries of state history liberally seasoned with anecdotal information. Others choose dominant themes: David Danbom focuses on North Dakota's isolation and isolationism, Lawrence Christensen emphasizes the Civil War in Missouri, and Herbert Hoover views the history of South Dakota from the perspective of Indian-white relations.

Spatial images abound, despite the crazy geography imposed by the ordering of chapters. "Heartland," itself, suggests the center, the middle, or the average. Danbom proclaims North Dakota "the most midwestern state"; Davis says centrality, typicality, and middleness "apply with sharper focus to Illinois" than to its neighbors; Kansas, with its middle class, midwestern rural values "is one of the more typical parts of the region"; Schwieder describes Iowa as "the middle land," Christensen Missouri as "the heart of the nation." In his introduction,

Madison emphasizes that the twelve-state region "truly is the heartland of the nation" despite state-to-state differences.

What do such statements mean? Colorado and Oklahoma, closer geographically to the center of the nation than any state east of the Mississippi River, rarely are singled out as being "in the middle" of anything except space. Neither Michigan nor Wisconsin, included in this volume, are more "heartland" than Tennessee or Kentucky, which are omitted. Is Iowa any more of a cultural, economic, or political "middle" than Oregon? None of the twelve middle-western states is anything like a microcosm of the nation; they are average in the sense that the number 24 is the average of the numbers 6 and 42; but 24 is certainly not much "like" either 6 or 42. Attempts to make the Middle West the American norm fail for this simple reason, and, stripped of their rhetoric on typicality, these twelve essays go a long way toward explaining why this is true.

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