

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 2007

"Young Poets Write What They Know" William Reed Dun Roy, Poet Of The Plains

Carrie Shippers

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Shippers, Carrie, ""Young Poets Write What They Know" William Reed Dun Roy, Poet Of The Plains" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1506.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1506>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

“YOUNG POETS WRITE WHAT THEY KNOW”

WILLIAM REED DUNROY, POET OF THE PLAINS

CARRIE SHIPERS

In a column for the *Lincoln Courier*, a newspaper that actively covered the city’s political and artistic scenes in the mid-1890s, William Reed Dunroy writes, “Young poets write what they know; what life has taught them.”¹ If his own poetry and imaginative prose are any indication, what Dunroy himself knew best, and cared about most deeply, is the Great Plains region—its weather, landscape, and the lives of its people. Dunroy’s career as a poet and a reporter began in Nebraska, and his work is most remarkable when he is writing about the place he loved.

Dunroy has not been overlooked by those investigating or cataloging writers from Nebraska or the Great Plains, but little in-depth study of his work has been undertaken.

Key Words: Great Plains literature, homesteading, landscape, poetry

Carrie Shippers’s poems and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in Crab Orchard Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, Southern Poetry Review, Meridian, Pleiades, and Prairie Schooner. She is a PhD student in English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

[GPQ 27 (Summer 2007): 192-202]

In the *Nebraska Centennial Literary Map and Guide to Nebraska Authors*, Bernice Kauffman describes Dunroy as follows: “A critic and poet, Mr. Dunroy wrote for the *Lincoln Courier* in the 1890s. He published three volumes of poetry.”² According to the criteria for inclusion used by Emily Jane Udzenski, who lists Dunroy’s three major works in a brief entry in *A Handlist of Nebraska Authors*, he qualifies as a “non-native writer.” In the preface to her study, Udzenski distinguishes between two types of non-native writers: “(1) those writers not born in Nebraska who were resident in the state for at least ten years and (2) those writers not born in Nebraska who, though residents for fewer than ten years, published works with subject matter of particular interest to Nebraska and the Great Plains region.”³ Although it is fair to include Dunroy as a member of the former category, his work is most interesting when discussed in terms of the latter.

EARLY LIFE

Dunroy may initially seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion among Great Plains poets.

He was born in Galesburg, Illinois, on October 1, 1869, to Reed Dunroy and Catherine Sarah Davis Dunroy.⁴ His mother was born in Indiana, his father in New Jersey.⁵ Although his parents were married on September 13, 1868,⁶ there is a possibility that William Dunroy was not his parents'—or at least his father's—first child. Reed Dunroy is listed as the father of several children listed as only "Son Dunroy" who were born in Illinois in 1865, 1866, and 1868.⁷ None of these records names the mother more specifically than "Mrs. Dunroy," and William does not seem to have had any surviving siblings. Dunroy was raised in northwestern Iowa, attended one year of high school in South Omaha, and is first listed in the South Omaha city directory in 1889 when he was twenty.⁸ The last time he is recorded as a resident of the Great Plains is in 1900, and by 1905 he was employed by the *Chicago Record*; he died in that city in 1921 at the age of forty-five.⁹ All told, there is sufficient evidence to substantiate Dunroy's residence in Nebraska for only eleven years. However, those eleven years were undeniably productive ones for him, and much of his poetry and prose from this time amply demonstrate the influence that the Great Plains, and Nebraska more specifically, exerted on his imagination.

Beginning with his first appearance in the South Omaha portion of the Omaha city directory in 1889, the time Dunroy spent in Omaha and Lincoln was marked by frequent changes of address and employment. Throughout those years, neither his place of residence—a succession of boarding houses and the YMCA—nor his employment—most often as a reporter or clerk—are ever the same two years in succession. The first time Dunroy can be associated definitively with the newspaper business is found in the 1893 South Omaha directory, which lists his occupation as "reporter, *World-Herald*."¹⁰

DUNROY'S LINCOLN CAREER

Dunroy likely moved to Lincoln sometime in 1894. He was admitted to the University of

Nebraska in November 1894, where he enrolled to engage in "advanced literary work."¹¹ During his two semesters of enrollment, Dunroy took an active role in the social and intellectual aspects of university life, although he took only two courses in English literature and was never officially admitted to a program.¹² In the 1898 *Sombrero*, as the university yearbook was then titled, Dunroy is listed as a member "*in urbe*" of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, Nebraska Lambda Phi chapter, and is included in the list of English Club members.¹³ More remarkably, his poem "Nebrasky" appears on the front cover of the volume; this poem which describes "th' bluest sky,/That smiles an' smiles an' smiles" and the "lovin' winds that bend the grass" would become one of Dunroy's most frequently reprinted works.¹⁴ In addition, a poem dedicated to L. A. Sherman, a member of the English department faculty, is included in the "Literary" section; Dunroy also furnished the text for the Inaugural Hymn, dedicated to Chancellor George E. MacLean and set to music by Willard Kimball, who later founded the university's School of Music. Dunroy's song was sung by the University Chorus on Commencement Day 1896.¹⁵ The hymn's lyrics reveal the poet's preoccupation with the Nebraska landscape, describing the university as standing "Upon a floor of prairie lands," where "By day and night the west winds sweep/ In willful wildness 'round her walls."¹⁶ Dunroy's poems also appear in the first issue of the *Nebraska Literary Magazine*, a publication associated with the English Club.¹⁷

Shortly after he enrolled at the university, Dunroy began his career at the *Lincoln Courier*, edited by W. Morton Smith. The *Courier*, which appeared on Saturdays, was a weekly publication that divided its attention between the city's political and social scenes, combining lengthy assessments of state and local leadership with theater reviews and literary criticism. At times, the paper also published political cartoons and seems to have enjoyed a rivalry with the daily and more established *Lincoln Evening Journal*. Beginning on December 8, 1894, Dunroy's poems and columns appear

frequently in the *Courier*, often at the rate of several a week, before tapering off in late 1895. His final column, a very earnest discussion of fraternity life, appears on February 8, 1896.¹⁸ Much, although not all, of his work that appears in this paper carries the note "Written for *The Courier*" below the title, which indicates that Dunroy was either writing for other publications at the same time or that his work was being reprinted elsewhere with some frequency. In the issue in which his work first appears, an unsigned article near the front of the paper introduces Dunroy to the paper's readers by discussing his first volume of poetry, *Blades from Nebraska Grasses*. The author writes:

There is no attempt at impressive versification, simply the telling of a story in poetic form; but he has a delicate touch, and an artist's spirit, and whether in the verses that are redolent of Nebraska fields, that tell of the rugged home life of the prairies, or in the ballads or bits of color and sentiment that are interspersed through the pages, the young author invariably pleases with his grace of expression.¹⁹

Similarly high praise is offered in the book's foreword, written by Elia Peattie, the first "girl" reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, who also reported for the *Omaha Morning Herald* from 1888 to 1896.²⁰ Peattie and Dunroy may have met while he worked at the *Herald* in 1893; he later dedicated to her the poem "All Is Good."²¹ Like the unnamed writer in the *Courier*, Peattie characterizes Dunroy's work by mentioning the place that inspired it: "Nebraska has a beauty of her own—a white light, a fiercely blue sky, reaches of windswept prairie and nights of wonderful splendor. All this is beginning to find expression through the young poets who are arising in the midst of these scenes, and who are feeding upon them."²² Thus there seems to be an agreement among Dunroy's early readers about the important role the physical and emotional landscape of the Great Plains plays in his work.

Too often, an examination of the role of place in a writer's work becomes an attempt to defend how that place, perhaps particularly when that place is in the middle of the country, can serve to inspire a writer at all. While this defensiveness certainly seems to be present in Smith's and Peattie's praise of Dunroy's work, it is productive to consider his own words on the subject. In a *Courier* column entitled "Literary Lincoln," Dunroy provides a survey of local writers, beginning with Willa Cather, whom he calls "one of the most original writers in the city," and continuing with Louise Pound, A. L. Bixby, and Herbert Bates, an English professor at the university. Dunroy concludes the piece by mentioning the efforts of the English club and the *Literary Magazine*. He states:

There is much to write about in this western land, many messages to be told to the world, and there is no reason why Lincoln, the Athens of Nebraska, should not produce those who may tell these messages to the world. I for one believe that in our midst are writers as good as the best. All they want is a little self-confidence. Let them select home themes and write with heart and soul and success will crown their efforts.²³

While Dunroy modestly makes no mention of his own work in this column, his emphasis on "home themes" in his advice to other writers is significant. A closer examination of Dunroy's work upon such themes reveals how successfully he followed his own counsel.

WRITING THE NEBRASKA LANDSCAPE

Blades from Nebraska Grasses does not list a publication date, but comments in the *Lincoln Courier* indicate that the book was published sometime before December 1894. Because most lists of Dunroy's works do not include *Blades*, it seems possible that either he or a friend paid to have the book printed privately, which would not have been an unusual practice at the time, especially for a first book. Although it is difficult to speculate about the size of Dunroy's

audience with any degree of certainty, he seems to have had some degree of local following. The April 6, 1895, edition of the *Courier* uses a quarter-page advertisement and a small prose notice to announce a poetry reading by Dunroy. The reading, held on Monday, April 8, in the University of Nebraska chapel, featured music during the intermissions and an introduction by former congressman and 1896 presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan; admission cost twenty-five cents.²⁴ This reading may have been one of several Dunroy did in Nebraska. In February 1895, Elia Peattie announced in her column in the *Omaha Morning Herald*: "Mr. William Reed Dunroy, the young poet, is to give readings of his own verses at various towns in the state. This will assist in helping him through his university course at Lincoln."²⁵ Further evidence of Dunroy's popularity is suggested by the publication history of his second book, *Corn Tassels: A Book of Corn Rhymes*. Originally published in 1897 by the Ivy Press in Lincoln, it was apparently popular enough to justify two subsequent editions, in 1899 and 1900, by the University of Nebraska. Between the first and second editions, Dunroy made a number of revisions, most notably the addition of several poems, including "To the First Nebraska," "Indian Plume," "Prayer During Drouth," and "Huskin' Corn."²⁶

A review written by Carl Smith, a fellow Nebraskan poet, for the *Chicago Record* and partially quoted in the *Lincoln Evening Post* described *Corn Tassels*:

[I]t is of the westland in prime and chief. It tells of prairies and sod houses and desolation and aspiration and other things which are mixed in with the life of the homesteader. But while youth impels the author to write pessimistically sometimes, a wholesome life and an honest heart cause him to see a great deal of good in his sandhill world. His little book is a sort of hopeful edition of Hamlin Garland.²⁷

Smith's assessment of Dunroy's attitude toward the Great Plains is remarkably astute. While

Dunroy did find much to admire in the landscape of the Plains, it would be a mistake to characterize his poems as merely interested in the picturesque. For example, the opening stanza of the poem "Mid-summer," which appears in *Blades*, emphasizes the dry, intense heat of the prairie summer:

Each morning opens wide the fiery doors
Of the furnace of the fiercely burning sun,
And lets the blasting heat-sprites run
With swiftness, o'er the shriveled sod-strewn
floors.²⁸

Until night falls in the penultimate stanza of the poem, the ABBA rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter lines, combined with use of words such as "parching," "burning," "sultry," and "loll," help to create within the poem an oppressive atmosphere that is familiar to many a Plains dweller. This is not to say that Dunroy never portrays life in the region as idyllic; in poems such as "Than in Nebraska," "The Land of Corn," and "The Prairies," he does precisely that.²⁹ Although the last of these is remarkable for its specificity because Dunroy mentions several animals of the Plains, including the gopher, curlew, plover, meadowlark, and bobolink, "The Prairies" is essentially a pastoral celebrating the bucolic natural world. However, Dunroy is much more likely to incorporate some sense of the dangers or hardships felt by those dependent on the land for survival, rather than merely to describe the land's appearance. In "A Corn Lullaby," for example, the speaker who in the first stanza likens the sound of "summer rain" to "the call of an elfland horn," in the second stanza refers to "the crash of the hail in the corn," which "leaves the stalks all stript and shorn."³⁰ Similarly, the images in "Prairie Pictures" move from dawn's "tender sky" to noon's "sky of brass" to a much more disturbing image in the final section.³¹ Here, a "Sod house, grassy, old" stands guard over a "Lonely mound, cross of wood" that serve as a reminder that "Man has passed this way." This poem's final lines,

Flowerless earth, starless night
Boundless, birdless air

stand in stark contrast to the more active landscape of a poem such as "The Prairies," in which the landscape merely is celebrated. "Prairie Pictures" actively subverts the picturesque by turning away from a description of the natural landscape in order to consider the repercussions the weather on the Great Plains has for its human inhabitants, particularly those engaged in agriculture.

Dunroy's prose in the *Lincoln Courier* is similarly eloquent when he addresses the struggles faced by Nebraska homesteaders as the drought the Great Plains first experienced in 1890, after several years of abundant rainfall, worsened in the mid-1890s. One of Dunroy's most poignant pieces is "Drouth Letters," a short story told in a series of monthly letters from a young homesteading wife named Mary to her mother in Illinois.³² In two short columns of print, Dunroy simultaneously captures the beauty of the landscape and the terrible price it sometimes exacted. The speaker arrives in Sherman County in June and describes the landscape to her mother: "The prairies stretch out as level as a threshing floor as far as the eye can see. . . . The fierce blue sky seems to be a vast globe that tilts down over everything and shuts us in." Despite her misgivings about the landscape, the young woman's tone is hopeful as she describes tacking newspapers over the interior of the sod house to make it "very neat" and expresses her husband's thankfulness that she has been able to join him. By July, however, the drought has become more pronounced and her baby is ill. Her August letter recounts the baby's death and the arrival of the southern hot winds that have destroyed the crops, leaving the couple with only "little stacks of hay." The arrival of rain in September revives Mary's hopes, but October prairie fires destroy both it and their small store of hay. She writes: "Out in the fields was a smoking heap, the last of our hopes for the winter. I want to come back home. If you can loan me the money I will come soon." The final, very short note is

written by John, the woman's husband, who informs his mother-in-law that the money she sent will be used to ship Mary's body back to Illinois. Although undeniably melodramatic, the column condenses into a single season the experiences of many women in the Great Plains, including feelings of isolation and helplessness in the face of natural forces. Yet almost every letter also contains optimism; Mary is enchanted by her sod house and is not afraid of the work it will take to make the farm a success, but she and her husband simply are defeated by the weather.

Mary's character actually appears in an earlier column on December 22, 1894, which describes a man surveying the farm that drought has forced him to abandon.³³ This column, among Dunroy's first for the *Lincoln Courier*, uses similar language to describe the sky and the stretch of grasses, but it focuses on the husband's perspective rather than his wife's. As he says goodbye to his homestead, he muses, "How happy we were, Mary and I when we came out here to these flat prairies. We thought we had a palace in that sod house yonder. We worked day and night and made it comfortable and pleasant." The speaker then recalls the arrival of the hot winds that destroyed their idyllic existence: "The great brassy sky covered us for days and at last one dreadful day the very gates of hell seemed opened, and hot blasts blew upon us from morning until night." Although Mary's death adds a touch of melodrama to both of these columns, they also share a quality of remarkable realism that indicates Dunroy's deep feelings for Nebraska and his efforts to understand the dilemmas faced by many homesteaders. Given the *Courier's* Populist leanings, it seems likely that Dunroy was playing to, as well as on, his readers' sympathies.

Dunroy also addresses the drought directly in his poetry. The second edition of *Corn Tassels* includes a blank-verse poem, "Prayer During Drouth," with fairly loose meter; its lack of rhyme and the variation in the meter is unusual both for the time and in Dunroy's oeuvre. Especially effective are the lines

Within the steps of last year's failure treads
 The plodding plowman, wearing out his life
 To call the promised bread from out the soil;
 And finds but chaff.³⁴

This short passage contains several ideas important both to the poem's effectiveness and the actual plight of the homesteader. The "plodding plowman" is experiencing not one but at least two years of failure, indicating the cyclical nature of the droughts Nebraska experienced in the 1890s. The mention of "promised bread" recalls the often exaggerated claims made by land speculators and town recruiters, and the combination of "plodding" and "wearing out his life" evokes the unrelenting rhythms of farm work. These rhythms are somewhat disrupted, however, by the caesuras that occur after the first or second beat in many lines. One can imagine the mental and physical fatigue of the "plodding plowman" forcing him to pause to rest as he goes about his tasks.

A very different poem formally, "The South Wind," which appears in *Blades*, takes as its subject the devastating weather feature responsible for the failure of the fictional homestead discussed above. In rhythms reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, Dunroy writes an eloquent plea addressed to the wind itself:

South wind, south wind, cease your blowing
 Let your hell-blasts cease their glowing,
 Shut your torrid furnace doors.
 See the corn fields seared and blasted
 Pitifully burned and blasted,
 Writhing in the fiery burning,
 From deep green to yellow turning;
 See the prairies, thirsty, panting,
 Hot and scorching, hot and panting,
 Shut your torrid furnace doors.
 See the farmers deep dejected,
 All their fields are sad neglected,
 All their hopes are blasted, blasted . . .³⁵

The repetition of "blasted," "hot," "torrid," "burned," and "burning" contribute to the poem's claustrophobic effect. The rhyme scheme, which is essentially couplets, although

repeated words sometimes stand in for rhyme pairs, also helps to keep the poem closed in, much like the oppressive and inescapable winds. This claustrophobia stands in marked contrast to the openness of the prairie that Dunroy describes in many of his landscape poems and seems appropriate to capture the physical experience of these economically devastating winds.

Besides closely observing the prairie landscape and the conditions of homesteaders, Dunroy also seems to have paid great attention to Nebraska politics, particularly the rise of William Jennings Bryan. While Dunroy's death notice in the 1921 *Chicago Daily Tribune* claims, "During his younger days William Jennings Bryan took an interest in him and paid his way through the University of Nebraska," this statement is not repeated in any of the Nebraska papers that reported his death.³⁶ Nor does Dunroy seem to have been close enough to Bryan to justify notice by Bryan's biographers, although he did introduce Dunroy at his 1895 poetry reading in Lincoln. However, Dunroy's poems do seem to indicate an interest in Bryan and his Populist politics. One such poem, "Ode To Bryan," is included in *Blades from Nebraska Grasses*. Its first line, "If loving thee were sin," establishes the tone of formal intimacy evident throughout the poem, in which the speaker assures Bryan that he has the support of Nebraska in his task of "overturning wrong."³⁷ Dunroy's sympathy with the Populist cause is also evident in poems in *Blades* such as "The Army of Peace," "The Modern Hell," and "Labor," all of which lament the unfortunate plight of working men unable to support themselves in the face of corporate greed.³⁸

Dunroy apparently sustained his interest in Bryan for at least several years after the publication of *Blades*. In 1898 Dunroy's poem "William Jennings Bryan" appeared on the front page of the *Lincoln Evening Post*.³⁹ Although this piece is not directly addressed to Bryan, its praise of him is no less pronounced than in the earlier poem. The speaker compares Bryan to Abraham Lincoln, "a second Christ / Who

struck the shackles from a bonded race." Bryan's task, the speaker proclaims, is to free the poor who are held "as abject slaves" and bound "with chains / Of debt" by the rich. The poem adapts the elevated language of the hymn and is "Respectfully Dedicated to the Members of the Women's Bimetallic League of Lincoln, Neb." An accompanying article announces that the league will sponsor a celebration in honor of the anniversary of Lincoln's birth, with a program of orchestra music and an address by Bryan himself. Even if Dunroy's relationship with Bryan were less intimate than that described in the *Tribune*, he either ardently supported Bryan's politics or saw an advantage in appearing to.

After Dunroy's departure from Lincoln in 1899 or 1900, he becomes harder to trace. The 1900 U.S. Census lists Dunroy as a resident of Plattsmouth, Nebraska.⁴⁰ Although his occupation is listed as "editor," he is not included on the masthead of either the *Plattsmouth Daily Journal*, the *Plattsmouth Daily Post*, or the *Plattsmouth Evening News* during this period. However, it seems likely that Dunroy was associated with the *News* in some way. On January 30, 1900, a poem by Dunroy, appropriately entitled "Plattsmouth," appears on the front page.⁴¹ Also, this paper periodically includes an unsigned column titled "Gleanings" that bears some resemblance to Dunroy's earlier work at the *Lincoln Courier*, particularly the inclusion of fragments of verse in the midst of prose; the paper also includes an unsigned theater column on Saturdays. The first half of "Plattsmouth" is essentially a landscape:

To eastward, turbulent and wide
Missouri pours her turbid tide;
To westward, like a shallow sea,
The prairies stretch out endlessly.

However, after mentioning the "bluffs of yellow clay," the poem becomes much more general, concluding with the mention of church spires that point to "The path of the heights of God." Having written earlier poems entitled "The River Platte" and "Omaha," perhaps Dunroy

felt as though he owed his new home a similar tribute. Certainly, while this poem may have pleased his readers, it is formally and intellectually less complex than many of those discussed above.

DUNROY'S CHICAGO CAREER

After departing Nebraska sometime between 1900 and 1905, Dunroy settled in Chicago where, according to his own account, he worked for the *Chicago Chronicle* as assistant Sunday editor, held a similar position at the *Record Herald*, and then moved to the theatrical publication *Variety*.⁴² Although Dunroy most likely had departed the Great Plains by the time of its publication in 1901, his final full-length volume of poetry, *Tumbleweeds: A Book of Western Verse*, demonstrates his continued interest in the region. Published by the University of Nebraska, the collection includes several "prairie" poems from Dunroy's earlier books. However, *Tumbleweeds* also includes a new poem entitled "Sergeant Charles Floyd."⁴³ Floyd was the only member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to die en route; he perished near what is now Sioux City, Iowa, likely of a ruptured appendix. Dunroy's poem originally appeared in the *Sioux City Tribune* on May 30, 1901, the same day a monument to Floyd was formally dedicated there.⁴⁴ This dedicatory poem praises Floyd's "courage high and splendid" and "strong example" while also describing the surrounding landscape:

He sleeps beneath the stately shaft
Beside the winding river,
Where prairie grasses clothe the sod
And stunted willows quiver . . .⁴⁵

A brief unsigned review of *Tumbleweeds*, published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, states, "Mr. Dunroy, who knows the West even better than he expresses it—and he sometimes expresses it well," praises him for choosing a title "which he knows will bring remembrance of the wild places of the further West."⁴⁶ The reviewer actually spends more time describing tumble-

weeds than considering Dunroy's poems, and concludes by criticizing the introductory section of the book for focusing too much on the poet's personal life. Despite the quibbles of the reviewer, the publication of *Tumbleweeds* and the inclusion of the poem about Floyd indicate that Dunroy's interest in the Great Plains did not end when he left the area, which suggests that his earlier poems about Nebraska were not motivated merely by a desire to attract an audience for his work.

During his time with the *Chicago Record*, Dunroy's poems appeared in that paper and in early 1906 were reprinted as far away as the *Los Angeles Times*.⁴⁷ His last collection of poetry, a chapbook entitled *Rubiayat of the Roses*, was published in St. Louis in 1907. This volume was praised in a *Chicago Daily Tribune* column co-written by Elia Peattie, who had written the foreword for Dunroy's first book, *Blades from Nebraska Grasses*. The reviewer commends "the young poet" for his attempts to "counteract the sinister philosophy of old Omar [Khayyam]," a Persian poet and mathematician whose work was translated by Edward Fitzgerald in 1859, while also noting that Dunroy lacks the "gloomy splendor" of Khayyam.⁴⁸ While critics still disagree over whether *The Rubiayat of Omar Khayyam* is skeptical or devout, no such doubts about Dunroy's work seems possible, as evidenced by the following selection quoted in the *Tribune*:

The things that God, the Lord, concealed
from me,
I will not peevishly demand to see,
Nor shall I seek to rend the mystic veil
Behind which he has hid his Mystery.⁴⁹

The book was used as a promotional gift to reward churches that participated in a subscription drive for the *National Home Journal* as a way to raise funds; advertisements appeared in the *New York Observer and Chronicle* and likely other papers as well.⁵⁰ The subject matter of Dunroy's *Rubiayat* seems in keeping with his other work; religious themes run strongly through the poetry in each of his volumes,

and in his columns for the *Lincoln Courier* he often mused about the mysteries of death and redemption.

After the publication of *Rubiayat*, Dunroy seems to have concentrated his energies on the theater, working in Chicago as a reporter and an agent. There is no evidence that he ever married or had children, although if his life in Lincoln is any indication, it is likely that he had many friends. Dunroy died in Chicago on March 29, 1921, under unusual circumstances. The *Chicago Tribune* reported:

William Reed Dunroy, poet, newspaperman, and one of the best known press agents in the city, died last night at the American hospital of wood alcohol poisoning. Mr. Dunroy, who had not taken a drink for years, had contracted a cold and had asked a friend for a drink. The drink proved to be a deadly poison.⁵¹

A business associate of Dunroy's is quoted as stating that he "took a drink for medicinal purposes yesterday for the first time in years," which seems to suggest that there may have been a time in Dunroy's life when he drank for other than medicinal purposes, although there is no evidence of this. Dunroy's death was front-page news in the *Omaha Morning Herald* and the *Lincoln Evening Journal*.⁵² The *Nebraska State Journal* quoted from a retrospective Dunroy had written for their anniversary edition, in which he writes: "Tho [sic] it has been many a long year since I have seen the candid prairies of the state wherein I spent a good share of my youth, still I always recall the state and her people with the heartiest regard. Here in this city, with its stone and iron, its steel and its marble I often dream of the wide stretches of the plain and God's good green land."⁵³ Despite the frequent inaccuracies in Dunroy's death notices—the *Omaha Morning Herald*, for example, claimed Dunroy as both a native of Lincoln and a graduate of the University of Nebraska—the prominent place they are given in the papers suggests that Dunroy was remembered as fondly by Nebraskans as he remembered them.

CONCLUSION

In a state—and indeed a region—as rich in literature as are Nebraska and the Great Plains, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that Dunroy, who very early in his career urged his fellow writers to devote themselves to “home themes,” has been consigned largely to obscurity. It would be disingenuous to claim that all of Dunroy’s work is marked by genius, or even that much of it is remarkable for its place and time. Dunroy’s use of rhyming iambic tetrameter and pentameter is frequently clumsy, and his musings on such themes as death, hope, and the comfort to be found in Christian faith can be cloyingly conventional. Even “Nebrasky,” a dialect poem that appears in each of Dunroy’s first three volumes, is only partly successful. His attempt to capture the accent of the Plains by dropping the final letter from words such as “and,” “the,” “of,” and any gerunds results in lines that are difficult to read, and the substitutions of “thar” for “there” and “fur” in place of “for” seem, at least to modern readers, more suited to parody rather than poetry.⁵⁴ Other dialect poems such as “Mother’s Old Rag Carpet,” which appears in *Blades*, and “When We’Uns Lived on the Farm,” published in the *Lincoln Courier* in 1894, are intentionally comic and do not allow Dunroy to exert the same depth of thought apparent in much of his work.⁵⁵ He may himself have realized this; in *Tumbleweeds*, the only dialect poem to appear is the familiar “Nebrasky.” Poems such as “Indian Plume” and “To the First Nebraska,” which were additions to the second edition of *Corn Tassels*, have not aged gracefully because of their political implications rather than solely because of the quality of the lines themselves.⁵⁶

In a column written during his career at the *Lincoln Courier*, Dunroy muses what we might learn “If the dead could only speak.”⁵⁷ No doubt a more comprehensive research of Dunroy’s periodical work, preserved on miles of microfilm, would tell us more about the shape of his newspaper career. The contours of his imagination, however, are remarkably

clear. William Reed Dunroy was not by birth a Nebraskan, or even a resident of the Great Plains, yet the landscape and the people he encountered once he came here inspired his best work. In poems and prose that combine lush description of the natural prairie landscape with frank examinations of the hardships encountered by those who worked that same land, Dunroy’s work demonstrates his ability to see clearly, and to inhabit fully, his adopted home.

NOTES

1. William Reed Dunroy, “A Melange for the Hour,” *Lincoln Courier*, April 6, 1895, 2.
2. Bernice Kauffman, *Nebraska Centennial Literary Map and Guide to Nebraska Authors* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 20.
3. Emily Jane Udzensoski, *A Handlist of Nebraska Authors* (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Education, 1977), i.
4. Thomas William Herringshaw, *Herringshaw’s Encyclopedia of American Biography of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: American Publishers Association, 1902), available online at <http://www.ancestry.com/> (accessed July 30, 2006); Edmund West, comp., *Family Data Collection—Individual Records* (Provo, UT: MyFamily.com, Inc., 2000), available online at <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed July 30, 2006).
5. West, *Family Data Collection*.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.; transcript, University of Nebraska, courtesy Dr. Earl Hawkey, Registration and Records, Lincoln, NE; Omaha, NE, 1889 [city directory] (Omaha: J. M. Wolfe and Co., 1889), 904.
9. West, *Family Data Collection*; “Will Reed Dunroy is Dead,” *Nebraska State Journal*, March 29, 1921, 2.
10. *Omaha, NE*, 1893, 1057.
11. Transcript, University of Nebraska; “Lincoln, Nebraska, December 8, 1894,” *Lincoln Courier*, December 8, 1894, 2.
12. Transcript, University of Nebraska.
13. *The Sombrero (1898): The Undergraduate Book of the University of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, n.d.), 136, 182.
14. Ibid., front matter.
15. Ibid., 226.
16. Ibid.
17. Dunroy, “Christ is Walking,” *Nebraska Literary Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1895): 59.

18. Dunroy, "About Fraternities," *Lincoln Courier*, February 8, 1896, 9.
19. "Lincoln, Nebraska, December 8, 1894," 2.
20. Susan George Bloomfield, ed., *Impertinences: Selected Writings of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xix-xx.
21. Dunroy, "All is Good," in *Corn Tassels: A Book of Corn Rhymes* (Lincoln: The Ivy Press, 1897), 100-102.
22. Elia Peattie, foreword to *Blades from Nebraska Grasses*, by William Reed Dunroy (Lincoln: C. C. Howe, n.d.).
23. Dunroy, "Literary Lincoln," *Lincoln Courier*, June 1, 1895, 5.
24. "Reading," *Lincoln Courier*, April 6, 1895, 10; "Mr. Dunroy's Reading," *Lincoln Courier*, April 6, 1895, 3.
25. Peattie, "A Word with the Women," *Omaha Morning Herald*, February 12, 1895, 8.
26. Dunroy, *Corn Tassels: A Book of Corn Rhymes*, 2nd Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1899, 1901), 14-16, 41-43, 49, 88-89.
27. Carl Smith, *Chicago Record*, quoted in "Postscript," *Lincoln Evening Post*, January 8, 1898.
28. Dunroy, *Blades*, 7.
29. Dunroy, *Corn Tassels: A Book of Corn Rhymes*, 1st Edition (Lincoln: The Ivy Press, 1897) 44, 68-69, 119.
30. *Ibid.*, 60-61.
31. *Ibid.*, 53-55.
32. Dunroy, "Drouth Letters," *Lincoln Courier*, March 9, 1895, 7.
33. Dunroy, "And Then," *Lincoln Courier*, December 22, 1894, 7.
34. Dunroy, "Prayer During Drouth," in *Corn Tassels*, 49.
35. Dunroy, "The South Wind," in *Blades*, 54-55.
36. "Wood Alcohol, Taken for Cold, Kills Dunroy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 29, 1921, 1.
37. Dunroy, *Blades*, 9-10.
38. *Ibid.*, 16-17, 26-28, 45-46.
39. Dunroy, "William Jennings Bryan," *Lincoln Evening Post*, February 12, 1898, 1.
40. West, *Family Data Collection*.
41. Dunroy, "Plattsmouth," *Plattsmouth Evening News*, January 30, 1900, 1.
42. Dunroy, quoted in "Will Reed Dunroy Is Dead," *Lincoln Nebraska State Journal*, March 29, 1921, 2.
43. Dunroy, *Tumbleweeds: A Book of Western Verse* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1901), 37-38.
44. James B. Holmberg, "The Life, Death, and Monument of Charles Floyd: 'a young man of merit,'" *Lewis and Clark in Kentucky*, October 19, 2003, <http://www.lewisandclarkkentucky.org> (accessed July 21, 2006).
45. Dunroy, *Tumbleweeds*, 37-38.
46. "Among the New Books," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 23, 1901, 13.
47. Dunroy, "Visions," quoted in "Bits of Verse," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1906, sec. 2, 4; "Let Hope Prevail," quoted in "Bits of Verse," *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1906, sec. 6, 8; "A Nocturne," quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1906, sec. 1, 4.
48. Jeannette L. Gilder and Elia W. Peattie, "Among the New Books," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 3, 1907.
49. *Ibid.*
50. "\$60 In One Week," *New York Observer and Chronicle*, September 12, 1907, 85.
51. "Wood Alcohol, Taken for Cold, Kills Dunroy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 29, 1921, 1.
52. "Alcohol Is Fatal to Former Nebraska Man," *Omaha Morning Herald*, March 29, 1921, 1; "Wood Alcohol Kills Poet," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, March 29, 1921, 1.
53. Dunroy, quoted in "Will Reed Dunroy Is Dead," *Nebraska State Journal*, March 29, 1921, 2.
54. Dunroy, "Nebrasky," in *Blades*, 8.
55. Dunroy, "Mother's Old Rag Carpet," in *Blades*, 14-15; "When We'Uns Lived on the Farm," *Lincoln Courier*, December 22, 1894, 5.
56. Dunroy, "Indian Plume," in *Corn Tassels*, 41-43; "To the First Nebraska," 14-16.
57. Dunroy, "At Twilight," *Lincoln Courier*, February 2, 1895, 3.