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Review of *Kate M. Cleary: A Literary Biography with Selected Works* By Susanne K. George

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Kate M. Cleary: A Literary Biography with Selected Works. By Susanne K. George. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Photographs, notes, works cited, bibliography, index. xiii + 250 pp. \$30.00.

"Sometimes it seemed to her that she could endure everything save the silence." Thus begins Kate McPhelim Cleary's 1893 short story, "Feet of Clay"; like many of her best stories, it captures Plains settlers'—and Cleary's—pervasive sense of isolation in the harsh environment of the Midwest at the turn of the century. Having moved nine years earlier from Chicago to Hubbell, Nebraska, Cleary in her life and writings adds to our growing understanding of middle-class homesteaders who migrated

to the Midwest in the late nineteenth century, and to our recognition of the important contributions of Midwestern women writers to nineteenth-century US literature. Suzanne George's meticulous biography and editing of selected works makes a notable contribution to the field.

A prolific writer whose career was necessary to her family's survival, Cleary moved easily between witty anecdotal sketches (especially of the fictional "Bubble, Nebraska") and strikingly realistic portrayals of loss and desolation. George captures the personal and economic pressures Cleary faced as her husband's health and economic ventures began to collapse; she struggled to write for profit while caring for ailing children and coping with the death of two daughters. Not surprisingly, Cleary's own health suffered, and she endured painful periods of depression. Yet, as George convincingly argues, Cleary's prolific endeavors in the years following her children's deaths, her husband's long absence for ill health, and her own suffering suggest that she viewed her writing as a psychological barrier against grief and not only an economic necessity. Though her poetry is largely conventional and some of her essays, such as "A Nebraska Hired Girl," reveal Cleary's class biases, the best of her writings reveal her keen eye for the unique nature of life on the Plains. Her women characters are gender-bound, struggling against social restrictions as much as against nature's devastating harshness; but largely her stories capture the sense of women and men laboring and surviving. Her early novels were hindered by undue sentimentalism, but in 1897 she published a mystery, *Like a Gallant Lady*, that focuses on an insurance scam and vividly describes Plains life. Like the poem, "To Nebraska," that introduces the novel, Cleary's writings as a whole reveal what George calls her "love/hate relationship with the plains."

George's biography offers the fullest picture to date of Cleary, an author whose contribution to literature of Midwestern women settlers deserves comparison to the better-known Caroline Kirkland, Hamlin Garland,

and Willa Cather. Anyone interested in American literature or more specifically the literature of Nebraska should read *Kate M. Cleary*.

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