

Garland and Eggleston, the “Minnesota Connection”

by Kurt Meyer

For almost three years, I have written a column entitled “Showing Up” for a weekly newspaper in North Iowa. The latest installment is posted below. Although I only mention Hamlin Garland in passing, in preparation, I took time to re-read an article written by John T. Flanagan, then professor of literature at the University of Minnesota, entitled, “Hamlin Garland, Occasional Minnesotan” (1941). Flanagan draws on an interview he had with Garland in California in 1939, one year before Garland’s death.

I have inserted several paragraphs, lightly edited for length, from the Flanagan article (below), and hasten to note that Garland never lived in Minnesota, although he came close. He was one mile south of Minnesota when the Garland family lived in Winneshiek County, Iowa, and twenty miles south of Minnesota when the family lived in Mitchell County, Iowa.

Here’s Flanagan: *“Following graduation (from Cedar Valley Seminary, Osage, Iowa) Garland vainly attempted to find a school which would welcome his untried abilities. He himself narrated his experiences in the summer and fall of 1881, when he wandered through Minnesota in search of work at Faribault, Farmington, Chaska, and Granite Falls. At Faribault he stood beside the “Cannonball River,” as he called the Cannon, and thought of his predecessor, Edward Eggleston, who as a young man had come to Minnesota and had written a novel about his new environment, “The Mystery of Metropolisville” (1873).*

No doubt Garland's own Boomtown of later years owed something to Eggleston's picture of land speculation on the frontier. But while Hamlin Garland was thus striving to profit financially from his course at the Cedar Valley Seminary, Richard Garland, obsessed with the idea that richer land lay where the sun set, had determined to make one more move westward. Soon the son followed to the new homestead near Ordway in what is now South Dakota.”

Here's my column about Eggleston, (1837 - 1902), a remarkable character with various life phases devoted to roles including ministry, editor, novelist, and historian... often blending them all together.

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In 1837, a boy, Edward, is born in rural Indiana. His mother is from a well-established southern Indiana family, his father, a graduate of William & Mary College. The boy’s childhood includes numerous moves, including a year spent in Virginia, his father’s home turf, where Edward first encountered slavery, which prompted his life-long opposition.

Edward received minimal formal education; most of the teaching he received was from his father. Nor, did he attend college, due largely to poor health. Yet, both at home and in various communities, Edward found a stimulating environment in which he thrived. One account noted, “His curiosity was insatiable, and there was, indeed, no period in which he was not an eager student.”

By age nineteen, he had a reading familiarity with a half-dozen languages and became an itinerant Methodist minister, a “circuit rider” assigned ten preaching sites along the Ohio River. His clergy duties soon migrated to southern Minnesota, where he resided from 1856 to 1866, hoping to overcome his frail health. When asked about his theological background, Edward explained, “Methodist preachers were educated by old ones telling young ones all they knew.”

This man’s full name is Edward Eggleston. If you’ve heard of him, it may be because of a book he wrote in 1871, “The Hoosier Schoolmaster,” (subtitled, “A Story of Backwoods Life in Indiana”). Based largely on his brother’s experiences, this novel accurately depicted 19th century rural life. Rather than the King’s English, however, Eggleston’s story relied on local dialect, how people spoke in the “backwoods” of southern Indiana. “Schoolmaster” is largely a happy-ending novel, noteworthy for its honest description of frontier times and the rustic elements of pioneer life.

Meanwhile, one state west and several years later, Joseph Kirkland was writing similarly about early life in outstate Illinois. He was carrying a “topical baton” passed to him by his mother, Caroline Kirkland, who wrote about settlers near Detroit, Michigan. Books written about 19th century American authors often pair Eggleston and Joseph Kirkland (while largely ignoring Caroline Kirkland). All three are forerunners of Wisconsin’s/Iowa’s/Chicago’s Hamlin Garland, who was influenced by reading Eggleston and Kirkland and encouraged through conversations with these trailblazing authors.

Today, I’m focused on Eggleston, who Garland called “the father of us all,” acknowledging Eggleston’s significant role in a Midwestern literary renaissance that, for a short while, made Chicago the center of American writing. Eggleston arrived in Chicago after the Civil War, lured by the publisher of “*The Little Corporal*”, the country’s first magazine for children. He served serially as editor of several periodicals. In addition to novels, Eggleston wrote American history books primarily aimed at young audiences.

“The Mystery of Metropolisville” (1873) is Eggleston’s only novel set in Minnesota. It features semi-realistic characters and incidents in a story that involves land speculation, questionable lawyers, and immigrants flooding into the state. The novel’s setting is Cannon City, an unincorporated community five miles from Faribault, 70 miles north of our Iowa home.

I conclude this profile by noting in 1900, Edward Eggleston became president of the American Historical Association, a remarkable achievement given his lack of academic credentials. Upon taking office, he “was prevented by severe illness from delivering the annual address of the president... however, the address was printed in the American Historical Review.” His concluding paragraph:

“I must mention with praise the humble historian who writes of town or city, annals that will be greedily sought after in time. ... History will be better written in the ages to come. The soldier will not take the place he has taken. I do not say that ‘drum and trumpet’ history will have gone out; but when the American Historical Association shall assemble a hundred years hence, there will be -- do not doubt it -- gifted writers of the history of the PEOPLE. ... We shall have the history of CULTURE, the real history of men and women.”