# Book Review

Kenneth H. Wheeler. *Cultivating Regionalism: Higher Education and the Making of the American Midwest*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. 166 pp. Cloth $38.00.

Colleges, wrote Oberlin College professor J. H. Fairchild in 1860, must grow naturally from the society in which they exist. In the West (what we would now call the Midwest), "something has been done in the way of *popularizing education*, and adapting the style of education institutions to Western society and Western wants." It would be a mistake, he continued, to simply "transplant Eastern educational systems . . . without any modifications, to the West. . . . If the system be not adapted to Western society, the discovery will soon be made; for it is to be tested upon a wide scale" (p. 44).

In *Cultivating Regionalism*, Kenneth Wheeler takes up this theme—the distinctiveness of antebellum midwestern colleges, particularly the denominational schools that proliferated throughout the region—and tries to show how those schools were not only shaped by the society in which they existed, but also, in turn, gave shape to the region and cultivated a distinctive set of values among those who attended them. His primary goal, thus, as the title clearly indicates, is not so much to tell us about the nature and practice of education as it is to show how a regional identity is formed. In effect, however, what we learn about the latter may be at least as valuable as his speculations about the former.

In five chapters encompassing just 103 pages of text (plus 27 pages of notes), Wheeler focuses on five themes that he considers distinctive features of antebellum midwestern colleges. The first chapter, based mostly on secondary sources, discusses the founding of these colleges, mostly by "a heterogeneous array of religious denominations, in combination with town sponsors and state legislatures liberal with collegiate charters" (p. 7). Some easterners wanted more control over the proliferation of colleges in the West, but in the end "the most diverse place in the world at that time" (p. 10), with the "most diverse mix of American religious communities in the nation" (p. 21), made eastern control impossible, paving the way for the emergence of distinctive educational practices.

The middle three chapters contain the meat of Wheeler's argument. In chapter two, he argues that manual labor programs were taken up more enthusiastically and more enduringly at midwestern colleges than elsewhere. At those schools, he insists, manual labor education was not designed as preparation for a trade (except at agricultural colleges) but was a means (1) to defray educational expenses (for students *and*, less

 

successfully, for the colleges); (2) to maintain students' health; and (3) to make of the student a real man worthy of public trust. Chapter three focuses on coeducation as a principled choice among the midwestern colleges based on the principle of "usefulness" for reform among Protestant denominations and for the "producerist" values of preparation for productive labor for the common good. (Most of the primary sources for this chapter come from Oberlin College, and here and elsewhere his data are heavily weighted toward Ohio schools—perhaps because this study was originally completed as a Ph.D. dissertation at Ohio State University.) Chapter four focuses on student life, mostly on the absence of student riots at midwestern colleges and the prominence and longevity of literary societies that promoted civil debate on campuses.

In an otherwise well-organized and closely argued text, chapter five, on the disproportionate production of scientists by midwestern colleges, is oddly scattered and unfocused, with half of the chapter devoted, for some unexplained (and probably inexplicable) reason, to the Progressive Era (and two of the people discussed, Wilbur and Orville Wright, did not even go to college!). And, again, this chapter is based almost entirely on secondary sources.

Wheeler consistently presents the choices made by midwestern colleges as principled choices arising out of a commitment to egalitarianism, democratization, and civil debate, and a devaluing of blind adherence to the traditions of a classical education that reinforced class distinctions as was characteristic of eastern and southern schools. These decisions, too, according to Wheeler, had uniformly positive results. He ignores the impact of the coincidence of the timing of the founding of these midwestern institutions. More significantly, he overlooks the practical benefits of, for instance, admitting women to schools that desperately needed to attract students.

In his account of the often discussed Lane Seminary controversy and the resulting transfer of many Lane students to Oberlin College after Oberlin met student demands for freedom of speech and admission without consideration of race, Wheeler acknowledges in passing that "Oberlin trustees were leery of some of the conditions, but the prospect of enrolling the [former Lane] students was too much to turn down" (p. 77). But he passes over the point quickly, emphasizing the commitment to egalitarianism and open debate instead. Other examples in the long section of chapter four on the absence of student riots are devoted to showing that students in antebellum midwestern colleges *never* rioted because of a uniquely Western commitment to civil debate, but several of those examples seem to show pretty clearly that the unacknowledged "principle" at stake from the side of the colleges' administrations was a fear of losing students.

At its heart, this book intends to "use the antebellum Western colleges as a prism through which to explore the ways Westerners imagined themselves and acted upon their thoughts." These colleges, Wheeler argues, translated "the values of an imagined community—their identity as Westerners—into an institution, the college." The colleges, in turn, "helped to amplify these values, and served as a crucial institution within the formation of a regional identity." Of course, not many people attended colleges in the antebellum West. Nonetheless, those who did "had a disproportionate influence in the region as they fanned out and taught schools, preached to congregants, and participated in civic life" (p. 6). I admit that I have a keen interest in studies that focus on the Midwest, and good ones are too few and far between. From that perspective, this is a most welcome study. At the same time, I am skeptical of studies that suggest that the Midwest is the source of a distinctive set of values—all positive. To his credit, Wheeler devotes a few pages in most of the chapters to colleges in the South and New England to make the contrasts explicit, rather than merely asserted as is too commonly done. To the extent that he does that, his arguments are pretty convincing. But he is not always as careful about drawing those contrasts as he should be.

In the end, it is hard to know whether to read *Cultivating Regionalism* as a narrowly focused monograph or as a broadly suggestive essay or, most likely, as an uneasy combination of the two. In any case, it provides considerable food for thought but also calls for a healthy dose of skepticism.

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