FOREWORD

THE PLACE OF Hamlin Garland in American literature has been hotly debated ever since the publication of *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1893. The earliest critics were shocked by a realism which was in advance of its time. But soon the currents of American thought had eddied past Garland, leaving him stranded on the isolated reef of his "veritism." Naturalism had moved to the fore. Only once in his lifetime did Garland's inspiration synchronize with the taste of the public. *A Son of the Middle Border* was widely acclaimed, and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography followed. But immediately the socially-conscious writers of the twenties raised the cry:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat.

And academicians down to the present, usually basing their interpretations upon fragments of the Garland-Gilder correspondence, have tended to follow the same line.*

Unquestionably Garland's literary reputation must rest upon a sprinkling of short stories and a volume or two of autobiography. But criticism continues to raise the issue of his motivations, to present the enigma of a talented writer who squandered his talents. It has seemed to me that the biographical approach would elucidate not only Garland the man, but Garland the writer.

*A refreshing exception is B. R. McElderry, Jr., in his "Preface" to the most recent edition of *Main-Travelled Roads* (Harper & Brothers, 1956).

A great deal of nonsense is written on the subject of editorial dictation to writers, and on the corrupting effect of publishers upon their authors. My position is this: The *form* of an author's work is usually determined by the requirements of his audience, and inasmuch as editors and publishers interpret such requirements, they may be said to direct the author's performance. Shakespeare couched his thoughts in poetic drama because there existed an Elizabethan stage that demanded such productions. Present-day authors write novels, serious articles—and even biography—because there has developed an audience for those types of writing. But the *content* of a writer's work is dependent solely upon his own personal make-up. Only an editor who has attempted to inject into a manuscript what was not there in the beginning can appreciate the hopelessness of trying to dictate to any author what he should say. An author's choice of subject matter remains a psychologically forced choice, the result of an interplay of factors of character and experience. Thus to my mind the biographical study is necessary groundwork for criticism.

Someone has remarked that the life of an author is made up of "reading, writing, and arithmetic." In this study I have treated of such mundane matters as royalty statements and promotional campaigns, a part of the "arithmetic" of authorship. I do so without apology. For to any professional writer such matters are important. Moreover, I am not convinced that there is a fixed inverse ratio between art and financial success. Sales figures, while not the final criterion of literature, do indicate the extent of a writer's impact upon his own times.

It has been my intention to present in chronological sequence the genesis and composition of Garland's various works and the critical reactions of his contemporaries, including only sufficient references to modern controversies to give point to the narration. For the rest, this is the story of a man who was a writer of some merit and an individual of great interest, who lived a full life in an era of chaotic change but a few decades removed from our own.

It may be objected that biography is superfluous in the case of a man who indulged so extensively in autobiography. It is true that a round dozen of Garland's books record his personal history: the four "Middle Border" books, the four volumes of

"Roadside Meetings," two accounts of psychic investigations, *Boy Life on the Prairie*, and *The Trail of the Goldseekers*. But the very profusion of Garland's reminiscences discourages the casual reader of American literature, and few specialists in the field are completely familiar with all these five thousand printed pages of unindexed material. Summarization is certainly in order.

But to such a synthesis has been added the evidence of manuscript materials, the comments of Garland's contemporaries in public forums and in correspondence. Fortunately Garland's own letters and papers preserved in libraries constitute a running commentary upon his published accounts of his adventures in the literary world. Often these have been used merely as corroboration, or to settle the matter of a date, for Garland was inaccurate and contradictory on such details. They have been even more invaluable in developing a picture which must inevitably differ from Garland's self-portraiture.

Autobiography and biography are, finally, separate art forms. In an early version of *A Son of the Middle Border* Garland himself admitted as much:

As a conscientious historian, I must warn the reader against believing that this writing contains the whole truth about an author. It is not even the whole truth about a man. It is indeed the study of a family and of an epoch. The Middle Border as herein depicted is not the West as others saw it but as Lincoln Stewart saw it, and the pictures drawn are truthful only in the sense that they present conditions as he remembers them and contain characters as they appeared to his youthful eyes. Even when most precise the narrative is not exact and certainly no man writes of himself without restraint.

In the same spirit I offer this volume, not as "the whole truth about an author," not as the definitive biography of Hamlin Garland, but as a critical study of his development as it appears to one motivated by the particular prejudices and biases set forth in this foreword.

JEAN HOLLOWAY

The High Road
Austin, Texas

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