

# *H. L. Mencken*



## *and the “Oklahoma Style” of Literature*

*By Lawrence R. Rodgers\**

During the 1930s American readers could not seem to get enough of Oklahoma. Two of the decade's most popular novels, Edna Ferber's 1930 *Cimarron* and John Steinbeck's 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath*, were set in Oklahoma and have come to be viewed as dominant literary portraits of the state. *Cimarron* was a larger-than-life tale set in the rowdy days surrounding statehood. The novel's two principals were a restless newspaper man, Yancey Cravat, whose physical splendor and brash spirit anticipated many

a later western movie hero, and Yancey's wife, Sabra, a quintessential headstrong pioneer heroine, whom Ferber loosely modeled on Elva Shartel Ferguson, wife of territorial Governor Thompson B. Ferguson. The novel was filled with the crucial benchmarks of pre-statehood history. There was the famous April, 1889, one-day land run; the clashing of sooners and boomers; the discovery of oil; the undercurrent of Indian exploitation; and an array of colorful bandits, speculators, surveyors, politicians, ministers, and claim lawyers, all set amid the rapidly diminishing frontier. Called by one reviewer a "gorgeous piece of work" and by another "an American rhapsody," the novel remained number one on the national best-seller list for the whole of 1930.<sup>1</sup> Helped along by a 1931 movie featuring Richard Dix and Irene Dunne that won the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Cimarron* sold half a million copies over the next five years. (A second, less successful movie was released in 1960 starring Glenn Ford and Maria Schell).

Both Ferber's and *Cimarron*'s national reputation have faded with time, as the novel has settled into that familiar shelf reserved for books that were, for a brief period, wildly popular but not good enough to sustain the label "classic." Yet the novel remains the most enduring literary vessel of romanticized images touching on this crucial era in the region's history.

John Steinbeck's 1939 depression saga, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was an even larger success. Chronicling the journey to California of a family evicted from land in Sequoyah County, the novel struck a strong chord in a country bending under the weight of the depression economy. It is one of the century's brilliant portraits of human perseverance in the face of adversity. Like *Cimarron*, the novel was the year's largest seller and went on to become one of the best-selling American novels of all time. It too was the basis for an Best Picture Oscar-winning film, starring a youthful Henry Fonda. And it, more than any other work, paved the way for Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Prize. With these two novels, Oklahoma, it would seem, had secured its place on the national literary stage.

However, the story of Oklahoma literature, for two reasons, is much more complex than a simple glance down the bestseller list. First, both novels were written by outsiders whose views of the state met fervid resistance from native residents. However much Ferber and Steinbeck may have imagined they were writing about Oklahoma, their books were, in the words of Oklahoma historian Angie Debo, "rooted in nowhere."<sup>2</sup> In Ferber's case, the problem was not just that the cantankerous writer had a knack for offending the

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locals during her only visit to the state. One Bartlesville paper remembered her as “an extremely offensive personality garnished with a profusion of hair dye and egotism.”<sup>3</sup> The real problem was that she proved an unreliable chronicler of a place whose history was too recent to tolerate her willingness to bend facts in the name of high drama. Steinbeck’s more egregious literary sins have been well documented, especially the stir surrounding his decision to plant the Joad family in the middle of the tree-covered hills in the eastern Oklahoma Ozarks and call it the dust bowl. Although Steinbeck has managed to maintain a steady group of critical supporters over the years, his absurd distortions of Oklahoma geography nonetheless question his authenticity as a writer about Oklahoma.<sup>4</sup>

Second, and more importantly, Oklahoma literature began well before *Cimarron* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. The canon includes a vibrant history of pre-statehood non-fiction prose vast enough—assuming one maintains a comprehensive perspective on what constitutes “literature”—to include several centuries of explorers’ narratives. And while Ferber and Steinbeck may have been among the earliest writers to bring national literary acclaim to the Sooner State, they were not the first.<sup>5</sup> That distinction, it turns out, had already been claimed several years earlier by a group of homegrown writers laboring in the less commercial quarter of serious poetry. Poetry as a genre has never garnered the kind of popular readership reserved for fiction. But for a brief period in the late 1910s and the 1920s, more than a decade before the celebrated release of *Cimarron*, Oklahoma poets were enough in the national literary spotlight to put them in the midst of a small-scale renaissance.

The person most responsible for that run of literary fortune was Henry Louis Mencken, the famous Sage of Baltimore. Even though he was the most influential journalist, editor, columnist, and social critic in America for nearly two decades, his avid promotion of Oklahoma writers comes as something of a surprise. He was, after all, deeply iconoclastic—an “intellectual bombardier”<sup>6</sup>—and never more so than when passing judgment on what he saw as the dim level of cultural enlightenment emanating from the country’s hinterlands, from places that looked very much like Oklahoma. A biographer, William Manchester, wrote that “it was his outrageous attitude which distinguished Mencken. He opposed everything respectable, mocked everything sacred, inveighed against everything popular opinion supported.”<sup>7</sup> While his bombastic journalism held no one above ridicule or any subject too sacred, the overall effect of his writing was strangely uplifting. More than any person, before or

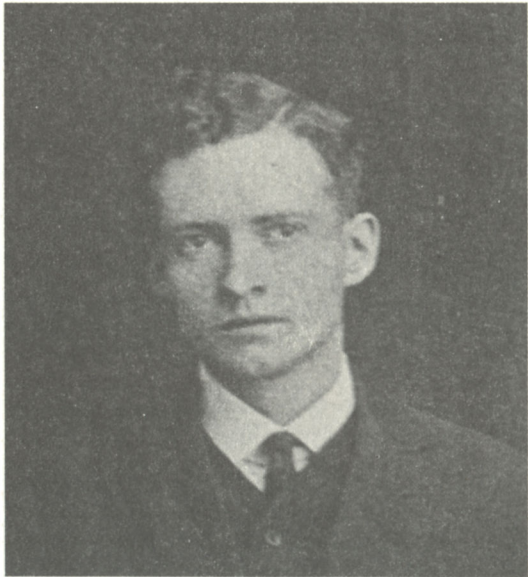
since, Mencken helped create a sophisticated reading public. Walter Lippmann, one of the few intellectuals of that generation on par with Mencken, called him “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.” The playwright Ben Hecht labeled him “The Republic’s One-Man Renaissance.”<sup>8</sup>

Mencken’s credentials for assessing Oklahoma writers were actually quite strong. As the co-editor from 1914 to 1923 of *Smart Set*, a magazine known for racy content targeted at upper-crust society, Mencken penned 2,000 book reviews and 182 articles, among them ones that showcased native Oklahoma writers. He was remarkably well-read, nothing seemed to escape his notice, and he had a special interest in keeping track of the goings-on in every literary nook and cranny in the country. He left *Smart Set* to become co-editor of *The American Mercury*, a post from which he reached his widest readership and wielded the most influence of his career.

Mencken’s most notorious moment, in a life packed with leading contenders for that title, came in 1917 when he published a scathing denunciation of southern culture, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” in the *New York Evening Mail*. The column was reprinted as an essay

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*H. L. Mencken (p. 468) had high praise for John McClure (r), a young University of Oklahoma graduate (Courtesy The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland, p. 468; all others courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, unless noted).*



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in 1920 in his collection, *Prejudices: Second Series*. His sentiments about the South were contemptuously to the point:

[N]early the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of worn-out farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums: one could throw in France, Germany and Italy, and still have room for the British Isles. And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the "progress" it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.<sup>9</sup>

He reserved his most audacious scorn for the postbellum literary poverty of the region, and was so filled with righteous rebuke that southerners spent decades at once trying to refute and to correct the basis of his claims. The famous literary critic Van Wyck Brooks went so far as to give Mencken credit for turning on the tap of the rich southern literary outpouring of the next few decades: "It was more than a coincidence that the birth of the new Southern literature followed the publication of Mencken's essay."<sup>10</sup> Why all this is pertinent to Oklahoma writing can be traced to one of the essay's passing references. Decrying the "neighborhood rhymester" who typified the field of southern poets, Mencken contrasted the group with a promising young Ardmore-born versifier named John McClure.

McClure was likely the first Oklahoma author Mencken had occasion to read, but by no means the last. He had followed McClure's career since 1915, when as a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Oklahoma (OU), McClure had the good fortune of completing a book of poems that attracted Mencken's attention. Helped along by his editing suggestions, McClure's book, *Airs and Ballads*, was accepted by the prestigious publisher Alfred A. Knopf and released in 1918.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, McClure was also supplying poetry for *Smart Set* as well as placing a three-stanza sonnet sequence, "To His Lady, Philosophy," in the March, 1916, issue of the country's most elite poetry journal, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.<sup>12</sup> Having been founded in 1912 by Chicago poet Harriet Monroe, the journal is still in print and remains a standard bearer of contemporary poetic taste.

In retrospect, it is difficult to ascertain why Mencken found the young writer so appealing. The Baltimore editor always possessed a soft spot for regional verse, especially the kind celebrating local geography that would typify Oklahoma poetry by the late 1920s. But McClure's poems, mostly lyrics built on lofty themes and sprinkled freely with classical references, were more the outpourings of an overly earnest *artiste* than a celebrator of regional lore. As an exam-

ple, "To His Lady, Philosophy," which was also reprinted in *Airs and Ballads*, is an unremarkable tribute to Dame Philosophy in the voice of a young idealist. Proclaiming that "you stay always, you most dear," the sonnets celebrate Philosophy as an enduring presence in a world overly burdened with the lowly intrusions of life: "We two will light our pipe o'clay / And laugh and blow the world away."<sup>13</sup>

Another example, "I Could Forgive," puts McClure squarely in the camp of the centuries-old lovelorn poet:

Love is so very hard to bear,  
 Mad Love on his own pleasure bent,  
 And yet I think I could forgive  
 If he were different.  
 I could forgive Love's wantonness,  
 Forgive that he is blind,  
 I could forgive Love everything  
 If only Love were Kind.<sup>14</sup>

This lyric is regular, formal, easy to scan, and essentially moral in its intent. Relying for its effect on the last line's lament, it is a poem whose language and message, because they offer nothing very new, are geared not toward challenging but comforting the reader. Given his old-fashioned approach, even if McClure's lyrics were more eloquent than they may appear to present audiences, Mencken's support seems curious. While McClure had managed to place a poem in *Poetry*, his verse tends to run against the tide of what Mencken would praise in *Prejudices: First Series* as "The New Poetry Movement."<sup>15</sup> The exemplars of this writing included Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*, Robert Frost's *North of Boston*, and most everything by Carl Sandburg, all of which sounds, in the tradition of Walt Whitman, like uniquely American, homegrown fare, full of vernacular phrasing and irregular, non-rhyming lines that could not be more different from McClure's verse songs.

Nonetheless, Mencken seemed comfortable with the inconsistencies his eclectic tastes might have betrayed; for whatever reason, his praise for McClure was hyperbolic. In a 1919 letter to a friend, he acclaimed McClure for writing "the best recent American poetry" and put his work in the same class as Sandburg's "Chicago Poems." Even more remarkably, he proclaimed McClure as the finest "lyric poet the United States has produced in fifty years."<sup>16</sup> Despite such accolades, McClure turned out to be a one-book wonder. Having completed his degree at OU in 1915, he took a stint in the military and worked briefly as an associate editor for *Southern Magazine* before moving permanently to New Orleans. There he devoted his



*OU English instructor B. A. Botkin (above) and student Lynn Riggs (opposite) patterned some of their own work on McClure's style (Courtesy Botkin Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, above).*

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energies to a successful career in journalism, far away from Oklahoma poetry but in continued contact with Mencken. Despite turning away from verse (which he later claimed, curiously, to have regretted publishing at all), his brief period of accomplishment served as a marker announcing the arrival of Oklahoma poetry.<sup>17</sup> It also set the stage for another beneficial collaboration several years later between Mencken and Oklahoma writers.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1920s, OU students remained quite taken by McClure's book of lyrics, enough so that a vibrant community of writers professing to be disciples of his style sprang up in the university. Among McClure's more ardent followers, even in his absence, were Lynn Riggs, then an undergraduate, and B. A. Botkin, a Harvard-trained instructor of English, who was himself an accomplished poet (and who would later become one

of the country's foremost folklorists).<sup>19</sup> A *University Anthology* of poetry was published in 1921 under the editorship of Joseph Francis Paxton, professor of Greek and classical archeology, who had been urged to take on the project by Stratton Brooks, the then-current university president. Sales were spurred by a favorable review in the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* by Angelo Scott, a prominent Oklahoma City resident who had served as president of Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College for a period prior to statehood.<sup>20</sup> However, the first anthology proved uneven in quality, mostly due to the poets' relative inexperience, a point acknowledged in the "Foreword" of the far more successful and substantial second anthology, which came out in 1924, again under the editorship of Paxton. A third anthology followed in 1929.

The middle anthology had the most lasting effect. Jennie Harris Oliver, who would later become a celebrated Oklahoma writer of

short stories, won a twenty-five-dollar best-poem prize for "Noon Trail," which, unlike McClure's poetry, displayed a distinct regional flavor. As a powerful evocation of the somber, quiescent quality of the southwest landscape, "Noon Trail" begins in a setting "so still, that silence languished for a whisper," a place "so hot that pale flame covered on the mesa." By the poem's third and final stanza, the scene has turned almost sinister: "It was so grim, that danger tottered in its cavern. . . / There was no place to kneel in all that shriveled vastness. That was so white—and grim."<sup>21</sup>

Moved by poems like this one, the anthology caught the eye of Mencken, who so liked what he saw that he was ready to make his biggest claim for state verse. Writing in *The American Mercury*, he announced, "There is almost, indeed, an Oklahoma literature, or, at all events, an Oklahoma manner." Like most things Mencken wrote, the statement was widely syndicated and publicized, which led Botkin to publish an article in the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* examining "The Oklahoma Manner in Poetry."<sup>22</sup> Botkin, applying what he later described as "a rough-and-ready botanical classification" of Oklahoma writing, praised the group as "the harlequin school of sophisticated lyrists fostered by John McClure, which is after all an exotic transplanted to Oklahoma soil." His goal was to counter the eastern seaboard's literary dominance by proclaiming the "hope and promise of an 'enlightened regional consciousness'" in the country's interior. Mencken read Botkin's critique, agreed with his basic thesis, and asked him to select appropriate specimens of this "Oklahoma Manner," which Mencken would feature in *The American Mercury*.<sup>23</sup>

Ten writers appeared in an "Oklahoma Poets" section of the May, 1926, issue: Botkin, Louis Turner-Barnes, Adeline Rubin, Maurine Halliburton McGee, Elizabeth Ball, Anne McClure, Maurice Kelly, William Cunningham, Miriam E. Oatman and May Frank.<sup>24</sup> Joining Botkin among the better known were Frank, who became the literary editor of the *Daily Oklahoman* in 1925; McClure, who as





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John's stepmother was responsible for fostering his early literary interests; and Cunningham, who from 1935 to 1938 headed the Oklahoma Writers' Project, which was responsible for producing the WPA guide to Oklahoma despite a period of controversy surrounding Cunningham's radical politics.<sup>25</sup>

The sixteen poems, with titles like "Sanctuary," "Mist," and "Pear-Blossoms," were mostly lyrics, the more interesting of them devoted to themes of place and landscape that captured a mood through memorable concrete images. Adeline Rubin's "Nocturne" is characteristic in its effort to capture a single, momentary slice of nature that would, without the poet's gaze, remain otherwise unnoticed in the larger procession of life:

Water is cool at night  
As the wind ruffles it,  
And with little chuckles Tumbles it  
And smooths it  
Down.  
Calm, calm water  
Refusing even to reflect a shadow.  
The tree that bends above  
Lets fall from its arms  
A fat green leaf.  
There is no sound.  
The water does not move  
And the little fat leaf  
Clings placidly  
To the sleeping water.  
Quiet Water.  
Infinite!  
Quiet!

Anne McClure and William Cunningham favored less Arcadian images, celebrating instead their respective towns. In "Roofs," McClure's town, whose "city square in Summer" is "Greener than Arden Forest," becomes defined not by "incredible green" landscape or "limitless blue ether" sky, but by the "floating" roofs of all the houses. Noticing "red roofs, gray roofs, slate-blue and purple roofs," she finds them to be the town's most striking feature, like "rafts of many colors / Swimming in seas of green and gold, / Oblongs and soft triangles, over the trees." Cunningham's "My Town" owes an obvious debt to the kind of roughhewn images Sandburg favored in his famous 1914 poetic homage to Chicago, his "City of the big shoulders." Addressing the town directly, Cunningham writes, "You were noisy then, and your tongue was a hundred hammers on frame houses." Concluding that "You are not clean, my town; you are

filthy," the poet still resolves in the poem's final stanza that "You are my town—my dirty town—and I am going back to you."

While Mencken's tie to Oklahoma poetry was not directly in evidence after 1926, with his help state writers employing the "Oklahoma Manner" had gained a reputation for an impressive body of quality verse displaying a distinct regional flavor. And under Botkin's enthusiastic guidance, poetry continued to thrive. In 1927 he became president of the nascent (if short-lived) group, Oklahoma Writers, which, continuing in the regional vein, was expressly interested in fostering "Oklahoma backgrounds and materials."<sup>26</sup> The capstone of Botkin's involvement in Oklahoma poetry came in 1931 when he edited and published an anthology of regional verse, *The Southwest Scene*, in which eighteen of the twenty-nine featured poets were Oklahomans.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime, Botkin was involved in a larger project that would bring Mencken back on the scene, this time not as the advocate of poetry, but as the promoter of an undeservedly forgotten Oklahoma writer named George Milburn. In June, 1929, nine months before *Cimarron's* publication, a different, more lasting and significant literary watershed occurred in the state. The newly opened Univer-

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*Poems that exhibited a distinct regional flavor, such as those by Jennie Harris Oliver in the anthologies produced by the University of Oklahoma, led Mencken to include an "Oklahoma Poets" section in The American Mercury.*



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sity of Oklahoma Press under the directorship of Joseph Brandt published its first volume. It was an anthology of regional writing called *Folk-Say*, the first of four regional miscellanies Botkin edited. Beyond the obvious benefit of launching a still-thriving press, the book had some important consequences for Oklahoma writing. Although Oklahoma writers, artists, and folklore were showcased, Botkin included material from all over. *Folk-Say* was, in his own colorful description, a “native medley of Indian legends, tall tales, old-timers’ reminiscences, old songs, folk cures, dialect, slang, and local-color sketches and poems, adorned with a buffalo-head colophon and cowboy, Indian, and oil-field motifs.”<sup>28</sup> A healthy dose of what contemporary academics were terming the “New Regionalism” gave *Folk-Say* the flavor of writing that was intellectually fashionable. The book received a great deal of local attention as well as generally positive notices in nationally influential literary circles.

Much of *Folk-Say*’s success can be traced to the enthusiasm that Botkin, the poet turned folklorist, brought to the project. He characterizes his zeal in a later-appended introduction:

Perhaps the discerning recognized *Folk-Say* for what it was, the excitement of a tenderfoot discovering the West. In 1921 I had come to the University of Oklahoma to teach English. Encountering a different and more vital variety of word and deed, I soon found my Harvard accent and “indifference” breaking down. The picturesqueness of the local scene, character, speech, custom, and history, and the possibilities of Oklahoma as literary material struck me with the force of the Oklahoma wind and stuck to me like a sandbur.<sup>29</sup>

Botkin’s local metaphors are fully in keeping with the tone of the volume. Anyone expecting highbrow lyrics would have been disappointed; all of it, including the poetry, is in the voice of the folk. There are poems with titles like “Oil,” “Water Rights,” “Buck and Bud,” and “People of the Backwater.” The latter is a sequence of sketches by Lynn Riggs displaying the same interest in curious personalities, vernacular speech, and folk motifs that would characterize his 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (on which the famous 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* was based). However, beneath the sometimes lighthearted language lie somber images of life among common folk. “The Old Timer,” which tells the story of a young boy on a buffalo hunt with his father, concludes with the assertion that “I’d shot through em both / An’ made the dust bile up’ / On the other side a way. / We left em whur they lay.” “The Widder” is a woman with seven children: “An’ John a-dyin then, an’ leavin’ / Me to wash an’ mend an’ scrub / Fur other people

to make a livin." She marries the preacher, "all dried up like a little prune," who conducts her husband's funeral, but divorces him when "He beat my childern"; she finally ends up with "Neb Farley, / Him that treated us s' nice."<sup>30</sup>

In the most chilling piece in the entire volume, "Two Boys at the Place Where the Nigger Was Found," Riggs relies on the nonchalant conversation of children to make a bold commentary on early-day Oklahoma racial attitudes. Having searched out the site where a black man was murdered, the two boys conjecture about the motive: "Somboddy started arguin / 'Bout the Civil War / An' this nigger didden like it. An' the rest of em didden like him." In a brilliant closing, Riggs juxtaposes the casualness of the boys' search for the "the exact spot whur he lay" with an image that signifies the cold reality of what occurred:

A few drops of blood are on the dead leaves.  
They turn  
And go out of the woods quickly, afraid.  
They keep the keep-sakes for a chance to trade.<sup>31</sup>

There are many less serious moments in *Folk-Say*. There is a section on Paul Bunyan, some wonderfully original Indian animal fables, and a poem, "Dow, Oklahoma," by A. E. Browning, that concludes by lamenting: "Carlos Domingos' cow has broken loose . . . / Jesus and Catherine / Will drink bitter milk in the morning."<sup>32</sup>

The volume's best pieces are by George Milburn, at the time an OU student. A writer of genuine talent and stature, Milburn remains the most undeservedly forgotten of all Oklahoma authors during the period. Born in Coweta, Indian Territory, in 1906, Milburn had left home at seventeen to wander around the Midwest, hitchhiking, riding freight trains, living briefly in Chicago and New Orleans, supporting himself by free-lance writing and living the life of a hobo. Titled "Oklahoma Opera," his sketches in *Folk-Say* paint a wry, world-tested view of small-town life that is far more subtle than one would expect from a typical college junior. Milburn is slick at times, brilliant and incisive at others—a deft surgeon taking a razor to small-town life, occasionally extracting a choice vignette, other times cutting too deeply. The curious ways of small-town religion bring out Milburn's most satiric side. One piece, "The Holy Roller Elders," details the fate of a group called "The Apostles of Christ," whose tendency to "shout and sing far into the night almost every night of the week," sends nearby property values plummeting, including those of a Baptist church planning an expansion. When



Mencken's "most talented" Oklahoma fellow was George Milburn, who went on to publish novels, collections of short stories, and works in several popular magazines.

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the Apostles' church burns down, Milburn's conclusion is characteristically understated and without elaboration: "But it was mighty funny how that gasoline can got there. Lawyer Weatherby told them that they didn't have any case. 'Maybe not,' said Ed Hostetter, 'glory to God!' . . . And they all trooped out of Lawyer Weatherby's office singing 'Love Lifted Me.'"<sup>33</sup>

Mencken had been alerted to *Folk-Say's* impressive debut through a review by John McClure, by then firmly ensconced in New Orleans. Mencken was so taken by the young writer that he immediately bought all of Milburn's available stories, which he began to feature in *The American Mercury*. Offering the same exaggerated level of praise he extended to McClure, Mencken called Milburn "the most tal-

ented fellow his years now on view in America."<sup>34</sup> He eventually published twenty-one of Milburn's tales. Benefitting from Mencken's promotion, Milburn went on to publish in other leading magazines such as *Colliers*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In 1931 he collected thirty-six tales and published them as his first book of fiction, *Oklahoma Town*.

On its surface, *Oklahoma Town* seems a harsh book. It seems faintly sentimental, but vindictively so. The stories retain the impersonal spare style of the *Folk-Say* pieces and in this way betray the overriding influence of Sherwood Anderson's 1919 *Winesburg, Ohio*. Like Anderson, Milburn had an affinity for unmasking the peculiar, sometimes brutish rough edges of small-town life. *Oklahoma Town* even ends on the same note as *Winesburg, Ohio*, with a young man leaving the small town behind in favor of the great big world. Given the limitations of Milburn's town, such an ending seems inevitable. Although he had a large contemporary following, Milburn to some degree was cursed by his work's association with folklore. It

was as if the more his stories were deemed accurate and true to the folkways of the region—something he carefully attended to—the more they were said to lack the depth of sophistication needed to be labeled serious fiction. His reviews, ranging from calling him a “new genius” to saying his writing was “as flat and as mediocre as the outlying prairie,” reflected this split view, but on the whole those praising the book far outnumbered its critics.<sup>35</sup>

Milburn went on to publish an even better received second collection of vignettes, *No More Trumpets* (1933), as well as two novels, *Catalogue* (1936) and *Flanagan's Folly* (1947), and several dozen short stories. However, he appears to have achieved such success without the help of Mencken who by 1934 had lost track of Milburn entirely. In a letter to a friend, Harry Leon Wilson, Mencken responds to Wilson's inquiry about their shared acquaintance. The prose is pure Mencken:

What has become of George Milburn I don't know. I agree with you thoroughly that he has a very genuine talent. Moreover, he is not only good at fiction, but also the writing of articles. I used to print him in *The American Mercury* whenever I could get hold of any of his stuff. Unfortunately, he is somewhat eccentric. Once he showed up in New York with a wife, a baby, and a goatee. The wife and the baby seemed lawful and reasonable, but the goatee gave me such a shock that I persuaded him to chop it off. He then seemed to be in some danger of falling into the Greenwich Village orbit. What has become of him since I don't know. His book of short sketches, “Oklahoma Towns,” is one of the best things of its sort ever done.<sup>36</sup>

If the letter signals an end to Mencken's connection to Milburn, it also serves as an appropriate conclusion to his promotion of Oklahoma writing. He had left *The American Mercury* in 1933, and although he remained a force in American intellectual life until 1948, when he suffered a severe stroke that left his speech impaired, his orbit of interest, which turned ever more toward national politics, was simply outside the concerns of the Sooner State. Nonetheless, by the early 1930s, just as *Cimarron* was picking up speed on the bestseller charts, Mencken had already assured the nation's readers that Oklahoma was a place of serious writers who deserved to be read and taken seriously. First as a supporter of John McClure, then as a promoter of the “Oklahoma Manner” of poetry, and, finally, as a strong advocate for George Milburn's writing, H. L. Mencken, as much as any Oklahoma native, deserves credit for putting Oklahoma on the literary map.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Vestal, "Miss Ferber's Myth," *Saturday Review of Books*, March 22, 1930, 841; Harry Hansen, "Cimarron," *New York World*, March 20, 1930, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Angie Debo, "Realizing Oklahoma's Literary Potential," *Oklahoma Libraries*, 16 (July, 1966): 67-75.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Julie Goldsmith Gilbert, *Ferber: A Biography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1978), 361.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Marsha L. Weisiger, "The Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma: A Reappraisal," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 70 (Winter, 1992-1993): 394-415.

<sup>5</sup> There is a long history of writing that falls under the category of literature before statehood, including, most famously, Washington Irving's widely circulated account of his foray into then-unknown Indian Territory, *A Tour of the Prairies* (1835).

<sup>6</sup> Gerald W. Johnson, foreword to *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South by Fred C. Hobson, Jr.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), ix.

<sup>7</sup> William Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace: The Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 22.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Nolte, "H. L. Mencken," *Modern American Critics: 1920-55*, vol. 63 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Gregory S. Jay (Detroit: Gale, 1988), 150.

<sup>9</sup> H. L. Mencken, "Sahara of the Bozart," *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "Mencken in Baltimore," *American Scholar*, 20 (Autumn, 1951): 415.

<sup>11</sup> See Fred C. Hobson, Jr., *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 49. Hobson reports that Mencken agreed to write a preface for the volume. However, although McClure thanks Mencken on an acknowledgment page, the first edition contains no preface.

<sup>12</sup> "To His Lady Philosophy," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, March, 1916, 286-287.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>14</sup> John McClure, *Airs and Ballads* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 23.

<sup>15</sup> See H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: First Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 84-89.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Bode, ed., "Letter to Fielding H. Garrison," *The New Mencken Letters* (New York: Dial Press, 1977), 102.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Hays Marable and Elaine Boylan, *A Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 73.

<sup>18</sup> McClure was not the first Oklahoma poet, but the first one to get widespread, national notice. Two Native American poets, John Rollin Ridge and Alexander Posey, were published long before statehood, as was Freeman E. Miller, who was known as "The Sunshine Poet." See Marable and Boylan, *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers*, 39-41; Doris Challacombe, "Alexander Lawrence Posey," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 11 (December, 1933): 1011-1018; and Leslie A. McRill, "One Hundred Years of Oklahoma Verse, 1830-1930," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 33 (Spring, 1955): 96-106.

<sup>19</sup> Botkin went on to study at Columbia and received an M.A. in 1921 before completing a Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska in 1931, when he was promoted from instructor to assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma.

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<sup>20</sup> See Roy Gittinger, *The University of Oklahoma: A History of Fifty Years: 1892-1942* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), 86, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Jennie Harris Oliver, "Noon Trail," *University of Oklahoma Bulletin: University Anthology*, ed. Joseph Francis Paxton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1924), 94. For details about the anthology, see Marable and Boylan, *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers*, 18; see also Bess Truitt, "Jennie Harris Oliver," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 22 (Summer, 1944): 136-142.

<sup>22</sup> See Botkin's account of Mencken's involvement in Oklahoma writing, in "Introduction to the *Folk-Say Series*," *Folk-Say: 1929-1930*, ed. Botkin (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), vi-vii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Oklahoma Poets," *The American Mercury*, May, 1926, 14-17.

<sup>25</sup> See Mary Ann Slater, "Politics and Art: The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers' Project," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 68 (Spring, 1990): 72-89.

<sup>26</sup> Botkin, "Introduction," vii.

<sup>27</sup> B. A. Botkin, ed., *The Southwest Scene: An Anthology of Regional Verse* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: The Economy Company, 1931).

<sup>28</sup> Botkin, "Introduction," v-vi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>30</sup> Botkin, *Folk Say*, 127-129.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>34</sup> Carl Bode, *Mencken* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 146.

<sup>35</sup> "Review of *Oklahoma Town*," *Nation*, March 11, 1931, 278; *Boston Transcript*, April 1, 1931.

<sup>36</sup> "Letter to Harry Leon Wilson," in Bode, *New Mencken Letters*, 102.