

History Project Research Report

Charles Petersen

November 10, 2013

Thanks to the support of the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), I was able to travel to the Mansfield Archives at the University of Montana at Missoula during the summer of 2012. While there, I went through more than sixty boxes from the archives of professors, academic departments, the university administration, and local businessmen. Subsequently, I have done intensive research in the archives at the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, and Harvard University, and I have consulted with librarians and received scans of materials from archives at the University of Washington, Reed College, the University of Oregon, the University of Nebraska, Yale University, Cornell University, and Notre Dame. In the next few weeks, I will take a research trip to Dartmouth to go through the letters of a professor who ended his career there, but first taught at Montana. I also plan to travel to Cornell in the next few months, again to go through the papers of a professor who began his career at Montana. Through all of this work, I have begun to reconstruct what I have taken to calling a "social history of creative writing."

Most previous histories of creative writing, for instance those by D.G. Myers, Mark McGurl, and Eric Bennett, have focused on canonical writers and the renowned professors who trained them. Accordingly, these scholars have written about those programs that have produced the greatest number of famous and economically successful writers, namely Iowa and Stanford. By turning to the little-known but pathbreaking program at Montana, I have been drawn to look at this history in another way. My question is not, *How did the establishment of creative writing change canonical literature?*, but rather, *How did taking creative writing courses affect the lives of those who went on to no renown at all?*

As with many topics at the intersection of intellectual and social history, this question has not proven easy to answer. Yet the materials at the Montana archive, together with related

correspondence at the Berkeley and Harvard archives, has enabled me to reconstruct a surprising amount. There is correspondence between faculty and friends discussing the students in the early creative writing courses. There are also lengthy letters from former class members discussing their difficulties, and successes, in trying to write as they took on jobs and family responsibilities. One student wrote to her former professor: "I sold my last bunch of heifers and milk cows this Spring, and have made enough that I can buy myself a space of time in which to see if I can establish however a small income and go on writing, though belated." Another writer, upon receiving an invitation to participate in a summer creative writing workshop, responded, "For twenty years my sincerest, most thoughtful efforts as a writer have brought me (and, more important, my wife) little but heartache and spiteful opposition. ... A time was bound to come when I should have to seek opportunities for my children rather than for myself." Another former student, when a professor encouraged her to write out her novel "as fast as ever I could," wrote to a friend, "That's peachy advice to a woman that has a family!" Alongside these letters of complaint, meanwhile, sit letters of success, both major and minor. One former student publishes a story with the *Ladies Home Journal*; another places a story in *Male* magazine; another, in *New Masses*.

Then there are the stories themselves. Whether published in the university's literary journal, *Frontier*, which soon became a national quarterly, or entered into local contests, where some have been preserved in departmental files, or submitted for MA theses, where they can be accessed via ProQuest, run through optical character recognition software, and data-mined, these stories, I argue, represent an untapped archive for historians. Call it the deep well of bad fiction — preserved for all time, unlike most previous bad fiction, in the files of universities. These stories, written by students from across the social spectrum, may not measure up to literary standards — they are often little more than thinly veiled autobiography — but they offer unparalleled access to the "mentalities" of their writers.

By making use of this archive, I propose a new means of reinvigorating the old American Studies tradition. Instead of looking to singularly powerful writers, like Melville and Thoreau,

as mirrors of the social mind of the nation, and instead of looking to dime novels or pulp magazines, cooked up in the metropole by editors trying to guess the desires of the masses, we can, by turning to the creative writing archive, look at how people around the country, — from across much if not all of the social spectrum — were attempting to represent their lives. Of course, this attempt is fraught with difficulties, as students routinely fall back in their writing on hackneyed self-understandings and try to ape famous novels. Yet no one, as far as I know, has attempted to make use of these stories, novellas, and novels as an archive. The pay-off could be rich indeed.

The other area that I am developing in my project is the way the Montana creative writing program affected the state itself. As I discovered in the papers of the Office of the President, creative writing in the 1920s and 1930s could be big news. The program was at the heart of several state-wide controversies, front-page news for weeks on end, as debates raged about what kind of writing was appropriate for the state's young minds. Yet to my surprise, I could not find one voice questioning whether fiction writing should be a subject taught at a university. As time wore on, moreover, the university's creative writing program became surprisingly embedded in the identity of the state. The epithet on Montana's license plate, *The Big Sky*, comes from a novel written by a graduate of the creative writing program; the state's other most famous slogan, *The Last Best Place*, comes from a literary anthology edited by two professors in the program. While this part of the project has unfortunately remained less developed than the rest, I still hope to write about this odd kind of dialectical relationship between creative writing as an institution and Montana's conception of itself as a place and as a state.