The Western Reserve is one of the nation’s most distinct and important regions. In this, its bicentennial year, it is appropriate that we review how this part of Ohio has been perceived by those who have lived in it, traveled through it and written about it.

When Connecticut surrendered its western land claims to Congress in 1786, it retained the area between the 41st parallel and Lake Erie, extending 120 miles west from the Pennsylvania border. Connecticut retained jurisdiction over this tract until 1800 when it turned over all authority to the government of the Northwest Territory. The land itself, however, had been sold to a group of private investors known collectively as the Connecticut Land Company, and through their initiative, the Reserve was ultimately surveyed and sold to settlers. Since the great majority of the early settlers were New Englanders, they put their own familiar stamp upon the land and created a New Connecticut.

This new western land was slow to develop. The first settlers came with the initial surveying party in 1796, and they found a land unchanged from that described forty years earlier by the Indian captive, James Smith, who reported on the abundance of game which his Indian captors found along the Cuyahoga and the upper reaches of the Mahoning. Although these Indians did not maintain villages in the Reserve, they hunted in it throughout the year. Also describing this land at an early time was John Heckewelder, the Moravian missionary who led his small flock of Christian Indians to Pilgerruh (Pilgrim’s rest), a temporary settlement established in 1789 along the Cuyahoga near Tinker’s Creek. He found the valley and surrounding uplands rich in timber and game. "Lofty oaks, Poplar, or Tulip Tree, Elm, Hickory, Sugar Maple" were intermixed with "Black Walnut, Cherry, Mulberry, Grape Vines ..." and others. Elk, deer, turkey, and raccoons abounded. He records that in 1785 "a Trader purchased 23 Horseload of Peltry, from the Indians then hunting on this River."

Heckewelder describes the "beautiful small lakes in the Country, with water as clear as Chrystall & alive with Fish. In these lakes, as well as in Cuyahoga River, Water Fowl resort in abundance in Spring and Fall." At the falls of the Cuyahoga, "Fish crowd together in vast number, & may be taken here the whole year round." The land quality varied in the region, but much of what he saw "has been pretty generally good," and away from the river he saw "vast bodies of very rich upland."

Of course, all was not perfect in this Eden. Bears, wolves and pumas (called panthers or "painters" by locals), threatened livestock and, occasionally, people. The area’s many rocky ledges sheltered large concentrations of big timber rattlesnakes which settlers described as "yaller" rattlers because of their color at one stage of their annual skin shedding.

Other descriptions of conditions at the time of first settlement are found in traveler’s accounts and in county and township histories. The quality of these accounts varies tremendously, some being factual and resting on documentation, and others resting on frontier tales and hearsay. Reading some uncritical pieces, one might well believe that the Reserve was settled by saints who couldn’t wait to erect churches and schools. While that may have characterized some early settlers, a David Hudson or Eliphalet Austin, for example, it overlooks the reality that many of the earliest settlers lived in isolation, and in the hard task of eking out an existence reverted to more primitive conduct than that they had learned back in the old Nutmeg State.
An example of the brutalizing effect the frontier had on some people might be illustrated by describing one Mrs. Noyes of Geauga County. She had a large and powerful frame and a violent temper. This combination of characteristics, we are told, made her "a woman of remarkable influence, especially when physical force was employed to accomplish her purpose. When a deputy sheriff came to take some goods she hadn't paid for, Mrs. Noyes seized him, and twisting a bed curtain about his neck, choked him until he was black in the face. Another time a sheriff tried to satisfy an execution, and she smashed him with a square bottom candlestick, cutting a hole in his scalp from which the blood flowed, blinding him."

People like Mrs. Noyes lived on the edge of utter poverty, deficient in goods and spirit. One of the most quoted descriptions of these dispossessed settlers appears in the 1820-22 travel account written by the Connecticut physician, Zerah Hawley. His unflattering and sobering view of the Reserve has been used by many later interpreters to show how crude and difficult were the conditions faced by early settlers. Neither the civilizers nor the outcasts can be ignored if one would understand the quality of life in the Reserve's first days.

By the 1840s, the Reserve had matured to the point that historians now attempted to tell its story. One of the earliest was Henry Howe in his Historical Collections of Ohio. Howe, who actually travelled through the region, relates the trials and tribulations of first settlers, but he also describes the remarkable economic growth occurring as a result of the Ohio-Erie Canal and also the Penn-Ohio, "Crosscut" Canal, both of which stimulated the life of the Reserve and brought it into the trading orbit of the outside world. While Howe was collecting material, an Akron lawyer named Lucius V. Bierce first got the idea of writing a detailed history of the Western Reserve, township by township. To that end he had a questionnaire printed which he distributed on his frequent travels in the region. It asked people to identify "firsts"--the first settler, first child born, first sermon preached. Bierce never completed his grand design, but he did publish Historical Reminiscences of Summit County in 1854 and a few years later followed with a series on Portage County published in the Portage County Democrat.

County histories and atlases dominated local history publishing in the post-Civil War period. Nearly every county was served by one or more such books most of which were produced by Chicago or Philadelphia printers who solicited the business and attracted buyers by including biographies of those willing to pay for the privilege. Though they must be used with caution, these histories are invaluable sources of material. Their availability has helped make local history respectable in recent decades. This is not the place to analyze their content; suffice it to say that from their pages one can sense the movement of America toward an increasingly urban, industrial society. Nowhere was that process more observable than in Ohio's Western Reserve.

Shortly after the turn of the century, a distinguished woman published her three-volume History of the Western Reserve. Harriet Taylor Upton was a resident of the region and well-connected with important leaders of the time, partly through her work as an ardent feminist. Unfortunately, her three volumes are overwhelmingly devoted to biographical sketches which, while valuable in their own right, do little to enhance one's overall understanding of the Reserve's development. A history of the Western Reserve printed in 1921 by Akronite P. P. Cherry, is filled with romantic stories, some of which are undergirded with enough detail to make one assume there is substance behind them. Since sources are not cited, one must approach portions of the book with caution.

Not until the passing of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II did the Western Reserve attract the attention of several skilled writers and popular historians in whose works we begin to get some sense of how the region has developed into modern times. Three interpreters stand out--Walter Havighurst, Harlan Hatcher, and Grace Goulder Izant.
They share certain qualities. Each was a writer before becoming a self-taught historian. Havighurst and Hatcher were initially novelists whose work received favorable attention. Gouder (later she assumed her married name, Izant) was a newspaper woman and had the writing facility of the skilled journalist. Since each escaped graduate instruction in history, during which the student is taught to suppress literary grace to uncompromising accuracy, each wrote with verve and imagination. Each was a master at creating in the reader's mind a vivid image of the actions and personalities described. As a result, their books have been cherished by generations of readers, many of whom might never have learned about the Reserve had their only contact been with less attractively presented material. Of the three, only Hatcher took the history of the entire Reserve as a subject. In other books, however, he plumbed its story, as did Havighurst and Izant, for colorful and revealing personalities and incidents. Let us assess each of these writers briefly.

Walter Havighurst, as of this moment still living in Oxford, Ohio, is a master of popular, regional history. A native of Illinois, but long time resident of Ohio, he has made the Old Northwest his own special writer's preserve.

After early success as a novelist, Havighurst turned to popular history and in 1942 published The Long Ships Passing: The Story of the Great Lakes.⁸ Perhaps it was the acclaim and success of this book that lured him into career of popular, regional history. As a young man, Havighurst worked as a deck hand on lake freighters. It was the start of a lifetime love affair with the lakes that shines through the evocative language and imagery with which he describes their beauty, power, mystery and romance. He has a special fondness for Lake Superior—Longfellow's "big-sea water." In this book the Western Reserve enters the narrative tangentially and in language which presages his later descriptions of the region.

Havighurst devotes more time and attention to the Reserve in his next book, Land of Promise: The Story of the Northwest Territory.⁹ He is not yet in control of his new craft. Too often in his pursuit of a good story, he is careless of the facts. However, the errors are largely errors of detail and, strangely, do not detract much from the broad canvas he is painting. To cite one instance: in describing the coming of the canals to Ohio, he makes at least half-a-dozen factual errors within two pages, yet he captures the conditions which made the canals imperative, and does so with such literary skill that the reader gets a reasonably accurate "feel" for time and place.

Various literary devices add to his effectiveness as story teller. One is the use of hyperbole. Thus we are told that "George Croghan...more than any Englishman of his age, saw the Northwest as a white Man's country which the Indians must surrender" (78). On the face of it, that would appear to be beyond proof. No source is cited to which the reader can turn for further enlightenment. But from the story teller's point of view, this hyperbole highlights Croghan's character better than a more cautious, carefully hedged assertion. Another successful literary device is the use of striking adjectives. Thus George Washington becomes "long striding" George, and at six feet three inches, who is to say he was not "long-striding"? Still another attention grabber is Havighurst's use of colorful chapter headings. He knows that a chapter headed "George Rogers Clark and Henry Hamilton" is not going to stir the blood, so he labels the chapter "The Redhead and the Hair-buyer." And a chapter titled "Treason Island" has infinitely more appeal than one simply called "Blennerhassett's Island."

Land of Promise contains a fair amount of Western Reserve material, including some which was current when the book was published. Writing of the Lake Plains east of Cleveland, Havighurst says: "The level shore, with its deep and fertile land once overlaid by Lake Erie's waters, has become a famous nursery and vineyard region ... In the farmyards, century-old elms arch above the dignified Western Reserve houses." Then he concludes, "Now the region has a serene and
smiling beauty that even tourists racing over U.S. 20 remember as one of the precious aspects of America" (315).

Here is typical Havighurst: beauty, romance and nostalgia work their magic on the reader's mental imagery. As one who knew that shoreline forty years ago when Havighurst described it, I can attest to the accuracy of his description. It is not his fault that in the passage of time the elms have died, the nurseries and vineyards have given way to nondescript commercial strips, that Western Reserve houses have decayed or have been converted into late twentieth century schlock, and that the tourist speeds through the region on a faceless interstate that gives him no sense of regional character to carry with him.

Of Havighurst's other regional writings, only *Wilderness For Sale: The Story of the First Western Land Rush* contains substantial material on the Reserve. In a chapter titled "Yankees Going West," he sketches many fascinating early achievers -- Moses Cleaveland, Joshua Stow, the Kelley boys, Alfred, Ira and Datus, Samuel Huntington, General Edward Paine, Samuel Mather and many others -- all of whom played influential roles in the developing land. It is the perfect milieu for the telling phrase, the character revelation, the sense of time and place which Havighurst so artfully employs.

Grace Boulder, who died this year, was known throughout the greater Cleveland area for her newspaper accounts of Ohio people and places before she started to publish in book form. In 1953 *This Is Ohio: Ohio's 88 Counties in Words and Pictures* was published, and twelve years later it came out in a new edition. Part II of the book deals with the twelve counties of the Western Reserve. Given the brief scope of each sketch, she does an excellent job of capturing each county's major characteristics, although she jumps forward and backward chronologically from one time period to another.

Women loom large in her account. In Ashtabula County's sketch we learn about Elizabeth Stiles, "daring but little known Union spy appointed by Lincoln," of Mrs. Eliphalet (Betsey) Austin who rode 600 miles to Connecticut to persuade her former minister to come back to the "Godless" Reserve with her, and of Betsey Cowles, "Ohio's first feminist," pioneer educator, early Oberlin graduate, who presided at the country's second woman-suffrage meeting, held in Salem, Ohio in 1850. Ashtabula's men are well represented also through Ben Wade, Joshua Giddings, Colonel Robert Harper, Platt Spencer and Robert Ingersoll.

Anyone who has tried writing local history knows the field is booby-trapped with myth, hearsay, unsupported local tradition and bizarre stories. Boulder seems to sense when she is treading too close to the trap. Writing of Geauga County, Boulder tells us that "one raw spring day an Indian woman sampled sap oozing from a maple tree and decided to add some of it to her kettle of deer meat. That night she served the meat encrusted in a golden sugary syrup. Word of the new food spread from hut to hut. White settlers adopted the delicacy. This, she writes, "is the legend, at any rate, of how the hard maple tree's delectable gift to mankind was discovered" (50). It is well she hedged her bets because maple syrup was used by historic Indians long before they settled in Geauga County.

Like Havighurst, Boulder pauses from time to time to express regret over the inroads of modernism. Of Ravenna in Portage county she writes: "Some dignified homes and buildings remain, recalling other days when this was one of the most beautiful towns in the Reserve" (53). In the quarter-century since she wrote, Ravenna's once-striking Reserve character has eroded further.

In 1964, Boulder gathered many biographical sketches together in a book entitled *Ohio Scenes and Citizens*. She chose her subjects skillfully, finding those whose stories contained a large element of human interest. Those with Reserve connections were Robert Ingersoll, "the great

Perhaps Goulder's most successful work was her revisionist study, John D. Rockefeller: The Cleveland Years. She wrote this book after her marriage to Robert Izant who, as a boy, had worked on Rockefeller's Forest Hill estate. She interviewed many aged Clevelanders who knew the Rockefellers, and she had access to a rich collection in the Western Reserve Historical Society.

The book has much to recommend it. Gracefully written, it contains fine descriptions of Cleveland in 1850 and in later periods. We see the city emerging as a vibrant business center with newly powerful industrial giants leading the way. She is especially good at tracing the interrelationships among this group, and we see the connections between the Harkness and Flagler families, between the Rhodes and Hanna families and many others. The book reveals much of the educational, religious, cultural and social history of Cleveland. The role of newly rich philanthropists is clearly revealed. In short, this is a good social history of Cleveland's elite.

Not the least of the book's virtues is the corrective it provides in assessing Rockefeller's character. He was perhaps the most maligned man of his age, the target of much undeserving abuse which he did nothing to clear up in his own lifetime. Mrs. Izant does the job for him, demonstrating conclusively how many of his critics distorted facts to their own advantage. If the book has a fault, it lies with this protectiveness toward her subject. She emphasizes the positive to the virtual exclusion of some of the shrewd and mean deals in which Rockefeller is known to have been involved.

Grace Goulder Izant's final book was a tribute to her adopted town, Hudson, the epitome of the Western Reserve village. Hudson's Heritage: A Chronicle of the Founding and Flowering of the Village of Hudson, Ohio, is a gracefully written history of the people and events which made Hudson so typical of many Reserve towns. Again the story develops through people -- David Hudson, David Bacon and his daughter Delia, John Brown and his wives, James Ellsworth and others. The book ends with an epilogue in which Izant traces her own memories of Hudson. She concludes: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if David Hudson could come back for just a day to see all that had happened to the tiny settlement in the wilderness that bears his name?"

Harlan Hatcher is the third member of our triumvirate of Western Reserve interpreters writing in the era since World War II. By the time he made the Reserve a special study, he was prepared. From novels, he moved in 1940 to popular regional history with publication of The Buckeye Country: A Pageant of Ohio. A special virtue of this book was the attention paid to the arts, usually neglected in general histories." Five years later Hatcher brought out Lake Erie, one of a series dealing with America's lakes. In this work he describes Johnson's Island, the Erie Islands, coal and iron, the underground railroad, ships for World War II and other topics that impinge upon the Reserve.

Hatcher's best book is The Western Reserve: The Story of New Connecticut in Ohio. Published thirty-seven years ago, it is the best account of the region to date. Like Havighurst and Izant, Hatcher paints with words, but in telling a good story he is careful to tell an accurate one so far as is possible.

He captures in his first chapter the diversity and shifting character of the Reserve. He quotes with approval Burke A. Hinsdale's assertion that "the southern shore of Lake Erie is not the northern shore of Long Island Sound: New Connecticut is not a reproduction of Old
Connecticut." Rather, says Hatcher, it is a region of arresting contrasts where "descendants of the Puritan Mathers share the Reserve with the Slovenian Lauschs, only one generation removed from the mountains of Yugoslavia" (14). Typically, he uses graphic imagery to reinforce the point: "The New England campus of Lake Erie College and the wooded public green of Painesville look down the slope of the Grand River to crowded Fairport Harbor where the big ore ships from Duluth put in to be serviced by the Finns who settled here a generation or two ago" (15).

While Havighurst, Hatcher and Izant have addressed many Western Reserve themes, other writers have probed deeply in selected portions of Reserve history. William D. Ellis, for example, examined the role and history of The Cuyahoga. 18 Ellis is yet another novelist turned popular historian and his work has both the strengths and the limitations of those who write with flair. Historical precision is not allowed to muddy a good story. He concocts dialogue and invents scenarios, but he does it charmingly.

Recent biographers of Reserve figures have added to our understanding of the region. Among them are Mary Lou Conlin writing on Simon Perkins, Allan Peskin on Garfield, Margaret Leech on McKinley and Garfield, and Stephen Oates on John Brown. 19 Recent college and university histories also offer rich insights into portions of the Reserve story. Among them are Blodgett's Oberlin, Cramer's Western Reserve, Knepper's Buchtel College and University of Akron, Shriver's Kent State, Gavin's John Carroll, and Skardon's Youngstown. 20 Histories of industries, institutions, labor unions and other special groups have also enriched our understanding of the Western Reserve.

Since historical writing about the Reserve has been narrow in focus, perhaps the time is ripe for a new Harlan Hatcher to tell again the region's story from a broad perspective. After all, its character is rapidly changing once more. As the last writer to take the entire region as his subject, it is appropriate that Hatcher have the last word, the final statement about this unique region: "No, Connecticut's Western Reserve in Ohio is not a reproduction of old Connecticut. It is too original, too engrossed in its own problems, too mobile and vibrant with its own life to be a reproduction of anything; but, like a gifted son of a gifted father, it wears the stamp of its progenitor without sacrificing its singular personality" (16).

NOTES

1 Smith's narrative, many times reprinted, is conveniently available in [James Smith], Scoouwa: James Smith's Indian Captivity Narrative (Ohio Historical Society: Columbus, 1978).


4 Henry Howe, Historical Collections of Ohio (various editions).


7 P. P. Cherry, *The Western Reserve and Early Ohio* (Akron, 1921).


