

Ohio States: A Twentieth-Century Midwestern, by Jeffrey Hammond. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2002. Pp. X, 195. \$14.95

It may seem a bit out of place for a journal of history to review what is essentially a literary work, but a strict distinction between “literary” and “historical” can be a false dichotomy when discussing worthwhile reading on Ohio. Books such as John Baskin’s *New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village* and Terry Ryan’s *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio* have demonstrated that compelling accounts of late 20th-century Ohio are as likely to come from professional journalists and writers as they are from professional historians. Jeffrey Hammond’s *Ohio States*—a collection of charming and thoughtful essays on growing up in Findlay, Ohio in the 1950s and 1960s—is an important entry into this admittedly small genre. Deceptively modest and straightforward in approach, this extremely well-written work touches on issues of religion, politics, race, gender, and even philosophy *en route* to a deeper understanding of people, life, and what it means to be an Ohioan.

Like Baskin and Ryan, Hammond has chosen to deal with life in small-town Ohio, but *Ohio States* falls somewhere between the poignant narrative of *New Burlington* and the more light-hearted memoir of *The Prize Winner*. Hammond’s ostensible memoir is rather a collection of thematic essays, each dealing with a particular subject: a family member (e.g., “The Pagan of East Sandusky Street,” “Science Boy,” “Republicans and Money”), an event (e.g., “On the Pipeline,” “Six Flags over Findlay”), or an idea (e.g., “The Bible Tells Me So,” “Ohio States”). In each essay the reader is drawn into what appears at first to be a simple narrative, but which inevitably (sometimes imperceptibly) culminates in a more profound understanding or personal revelation. Through them all, Ohio (and especially his hometown of Findlay) is itself a character—sometimes playing the lead, sometimes in a supporting role, but always present and providing nuance to the stories as they unfold. Though he may at times gently chide the provincialism he recalls from his Ohio boyhood, his genuine affection for the place is abundantly, if subtly, evident throughout. Hammond seems to reserve the same mixed, yet wistful reverence for Findlay and Ohio that he holds for his youth.

Perhaps the most characteristic piece in the book is his final essay, “Ohio States.” In it, Hammond relates his life-long struggle to discover what it means to be an Ohioan. Beginning with an account of his wrestling over the significance of place names on an old Sohio map when he was a boy, Hammond (now an English professor at St. Mary’s College in Maryland) describes with a trademark deft whimsy his gradual evolution of thought on this enigma. Despite his best efforts to find some definable quality to Ohio over the years, he was always stymied by the undefinable—even bland—nature of the state and its people. Yet it is in this very blandness that Hammond now believes he has found the answer he has sought his whole life. “An Ohioan’s mission,” he pronounces, is

to serve as a counterweight to whatever seems unusual, as a foil to whatever's happening once something actually starts happening. Wherever we go, we Buckeyes form a roving band of cultural ballast whose heraldic emblem might well be Beige Field with Nothing, *couchant*. An Ohioan is a walking zero at the intersection of America's *x* and *y* axes, a point from which everything else gains distinctiveness by veering away. Upholding this imagined, shifting center is what we were born to do[192].

As a professor of Ohio History, I have assigned this essay (which was originally published in *The American Scholar* a few years ago) to my classes, and it has never failed to provoke a spirited discussion over what, if anything, it means to be an Ohioan. Some students agree with Hammond, some disagree, but nearly all concur that it was the best thing they read for class all semester. While a cynic might point out that this may say as much about my choice of textbooks as it does about Hammond's abilities, I am convinced that any time one can get fifty college students in a required course to read and eagerly discuss a work, due credit must be given to the author. Neither strictly a history nor a memoir, *Ohio States* is an idiosyncratic but welcome addition to the literature on Ohio.

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