



E. W. Howe

“The Business of Life”: Work and Humor in the Writings of E. W. Howe

by
Amy Cummins

Journalist, editor, novelist, short fiction writer, philosopher, Midwestern personality, and humorist: Edgar Watson Howe (1853-1937) filled all of these roles. Although his writing has fallen out of favor, he is past due for a revival. Atchison, Kansas symbolized for Howe the promise of any American town. His writing combined fact and fiction and often used wit to express serious views about small town and country life, ironies in human relationships, political causes, organized religion, and the virtue of hard work. Fundamentally, Ed Howe was a popular writer and a conservative who wrote about the necessity of industrious attitudes and developed a style of humorous epigrams. Throughout his career, Howe conveyed a philosophy about work that can be expressed as two basic principles: first, contrasting thrift to shiftlessness and urging order instead of chaos; and second, claiming that success is “easier than failure” and arguing that industry always brings rewards. Evidence to illustrate Howe’s philosophy of work is selected primarily from *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), *Country Town Sayings* (1911), *Success Easier Than Failure* (1917), *The Blessing of Business* (1918), and *The Anthology of Another Town* (1920).

“Simply an old foggy pleading for more common sense”: Howe’s Position within the American Humor Traditions

Howe was born on an Indiana farm in 1853 and moved with his family to northeast Missouri, near the Iowa border, when he was three years old (Pickett 5). He learned the printing and newspaper trades with his father and brothers (Bucco 15). In *Ed Howe: Country Town Philosopher*, biographer Calder Pickett explains that Howe kept few records of personal matters, and when he wrote of events from his youth, “his memories—or his imagination” improved over time, for “reminiscences of the adult Ed Howe were always a mixture of fact and

Amy Cummins, PhD, is Assistant Professor of English at Fort Hays State University. Among the courses Dr. Cummins instructs, favorites include nineteenth-century literature, literary theory in application, and contemporary young adult literature.

anecdote” (2, 4, 12). When Howe was fourteen, his father deserted the family, only returning to help them after the death of his wife (Pickett 12-14). Howe left home at age fifteen to support himself as a printer and writer.

Working as a foreman, printer, writer, and then editor of newspapers, Howe resided in Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, and Colorado from about 1868 until 1877, when he moved to Atchison in northeast Kansas. He settled in Atchison for the rest of his life, except for winters in Miami, Florida from 1916 to 1937 (Pickett 327). Howe built professional success and incidentally fame as the editor of the *Atchison Globe*, the era’s “most widely quoted small-town paper in the United States” (Sackett 22), which he edited from 1877 to 1910, and then as the editor and writer of *E. W. Howe’s Monthly: A Farmer’s Magazine for Town People* from 1911 to 1933, a magazine with subscriptions nationwide. The nickname “Sage of Potato Hill Farm” was coined by the columnist Frank Crane, although Howe demurred from being called a sage (Pickett 287).

Howe’s most famous book, the novel *The Story of a Country Town*, was written in the evenings of 1882 after newspaper work was done. It describes the coming of age of Ned Westlock, raised like the author in Missouri. Containing autobiographical elements, *The Story of a Country Town* has been termed a “non-fiction novel” or “autobiography transmuted into fiction” (Anderson 110), despite the insistence of Howe and his brother that the book was not primarily autobiographical (Pickett 73).¹ After Howe published *The Story of a Country Town*, it earned such positive attention that it was reprinted twenty-five times within two years. Reviewed favorably in major periodicals, the novel is considered a landmark of realism in American literary history (Cummins 46). Although the significance of E. W. Howe has never been seriously questioned, the paucity of scholarship since the 1970s has resulted in a diminishing number of people aware of his works.² *The Story of a Country Town* remains the only book by Howe currently available in reprints. This essay endeavors to resuscitate contemporary awareness of Howe by inviting new readers and demonstrating the worth of critical inquiry into his various publications.

Howe perfected his pithy writing style when he started the *Atchison Globe* in 1877 and had to compete with two other newspapers, so his method to distinguish his publication involved humorous paragraphs and short, personal items (Bucco 17). Howe also developed his style in his previous venture with the *Globe* in Golden, Colorado for two years

in 1873 to 1875. The editor states with a semblance of regret: “I did not have sufficient judgment to devote my time to local happenings, as I should have done, but attempted to be witty when I had no wit” (qtd. in Pickett 18). However, one indication he was learning his trade, even though he was not financially victorious, is that newspapers in thirteen other states reprinted material Howe wrote in his *Golden Globe* (Pickett 20). Howe’s acerbic humor and plain style make readers feel they are listening to wits at the town well.

As a hybrid of fiction and nonfiction, the best of Howe’s writing possesses the ring of truth even when the incidents and people are undocumented. As Pickett claims about Howe’s journalism in Atchison, “separating truth from fiction in a country paper like *The Globe* is no easy task, for Howe, like many other editors, had to improvise” (32). In Howe’s *Atchison Globe*, “News and editorial, in the journalistic fashion of the day, were seldom separate” (Pickett 36); apparently, fine distinctions between fact and fiction did not worry Howe’s readers. Still, the editor insisted in an 1881 editorial that “in matters of news the *Globe* never lies” (qtd. in Pickett 44). In the scholarly study *E. W. Howe*, Samuel Sackett explains that Howe viewed a small-town newspaper “as entertainment rather than information” (23). His later magazine *E. W. Howe’s Monthly* was unabashedly personal and did not include news. In addition, Howe repeated and revised his own stories (Sackett 102, Pickett 302, 307).³ Sackett enumerates ways that Howe’s 1929 “autobiography” *Plain People* diverged from truth (158-160).

The clever sayings that made Howe notorious were frequently reprinted long before he established the column titled “Globe Sights” on October 27, 1893 (Pickett 108). Papers such as the *Boston Globe* spread the words of this “country town philosopher” (Pickett 111). Moreover, twenty-one of Howe’s aphoristic “country town sayings” originally published in the *Atchison Globe* are included in the 1928 book *American Press Opinion, Washington to Coolidge: A Documentary Record of Editorial Leadership and Criticism, 1785-1927* (Nevins 503-504). Items of all lengths from Howe’s later magazine were also “widely quoted” (Pickett 288). A national columnist remarked in 1919: “It is quite surprising the vogue E. W. Howe, of Potato Hill, Kansas, has in New York. In six afternoon papers of the same day I noted on the editorial pages of all extracts from ‘E. W. Howe’s Monthly’” (qtd. in Pickett 288).

Howe fits within the American humor traditions of “crackerbox philosophers” and “horse sense.” While Jennette Tandy does not directly address E. W. Howe in her study of *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire* (1925), she notes that “Today every Main Street has its crackerbox philosopher, every daily newspaper its ‘colyumist’ or its platitudinous poet” (x). Howe is part of the tradition Tandy identifies of “wiseacres” or “unlettered philosophers” who are “rustic critics, backwoods philosophers, instead of politicians and men of the world” (x-xi). Howe also can be situated within the “horse sense” tradition in American humor, as defined by Walter Blair in 1942 and referring to “good, sound, practical sense” (vi). Horse sense can be used interchangeably with terms such as “common sense” or “homespun philosophy,” and the term “is not only a way of thinking; it is also, of course, the name for the kind of ideas a man gets by thinking that way” (vii). Both of these scholars identify ways in which humor merges with philosophical musings and resonates with audiences, partly accounting for the widespread popularity of Ed Howe. In fact, Howe describes himself in *The Blessing of Business* (1918) as “simply an old foggy pleading for more common sense, more efficiency, more politeness, more fairness, more temperance” (71).

Norris Yates in *The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century* (1964) writes that Howe’s “sour proverbs” place him in the satirical tradition of Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce (20). Yates assesses a resemblance between Mencken’s “image of the solid citizen” and “the small-town editors who dosed the yahoos with proverbial pungencies in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and in the writings of E. W. Howe,” while the difference is that Mencken’s hero is “less bitter than the editorial *personae* of Twain and Howe” (158). Mencken’s introduction to Howe’s collection of aphorisms *Ventures in Common Sense* (1919) also establishes the link between the two writers.⁴ In 1972, Sackett praises Howe’s contributions to humor, particularly in the genre of “the brief comment” that has been “buried in old newspapers, almanacs, and comic magazines” and forgotten due to “the decline in the practice of reprinting favorite ones by ‘exchanges’” and to the scholarly privileging of longer genres (136). Howe merits a position within the pantheon of American humorists, and he deploys wit to convey his serious beliefs about work.

**“We hope every reader will pause”:
Howe’s Thematic Emphasis on Thrift**

Ed Howe’s fixation on hard work dates back to his upbringing in the years leading up to and during the Civil War. According to Calder Pickett, Henry Howe raised his son “like a ‘bound-boy,’” making him work in the fields and then the newspaper office beyond daylight hours, whipping him regularly, withholding affection, and rarely letting him attend school (8, 11). The narrator of *The Story of a Country Town*, Ned Westlock, describes his youth in ways that may reflect Howe’s own life. Ned’s father John “was a slave to hard work” who “seldom said anything to me” and “never spoke kindly to me” (19, 5, 20). Considered the thriftiest person in town, Ned’s father was unsure whether his efforts in accumulating property would meet God’s disapproval (34, 13). Scholar Daniel Tucker sees that in American history, “the tension between diligent striving for profit and avoiding sinful greed always existed” (17). Ed Howe, who was not religious and never admitted to spiritual faith, felt no such anxiety about profit.

The contrast between thrift and shiftlessness is fundamental to Howe’s philosophy of work, for he believed that people could be persuaded to be more industrious. *Thrift* indicates a reliable person who takes care of resources. In Old English usage, “thrift signaled a thriving condition or a means to prosperity” and denoted “efficient household management” (Tucker 7). Thrift permeates Howe’s works, and the contrast between thrift and laziness or wastefulness is paralleled by the contrast of order and chaos.

In *The Story of a Country Town*, this contrast appears starkly in the characterization of the indolent Lytle Biggs and his hard-working, much-maligned employee Big Adam Casebolt. Ned observes that Adam works constantly by himself to maintain the four hundred acre farm. Meanwhile, his employers call him “fat from idleness” and “lazy and shiftless” (72-73). Ned is disgusted by Lytle Biggs, who styles himself a “gentleman farmer” but does not work, unlike the overburdened women members of his family and his employee Adam (76). Both Lytle Biggs and Adam are sources of humor in the novel, Biggs for his aphorisms and the dissonance between self-image and reality, and Adam for his ability to make a sound like a cork popping out of a bottle.⁵ In the novel’s conclusion, the industrious Adam is independently successful, with a wife, children, and a lease on the mill that he will soon be able to own (411).

Thrift contrasts to shiftlessness again in Howe's first book of epigrams, *Country Town Sayings*, selected by Howe from the *Globe* and published in 1911. One paragraph exemplifies the mode of direct address and didacticism that Howe favored: "There is an old-fashioned word that ought to come into use again: thrift. There is a distressing number of shiftless people in the world, and while we shall call no names, we hope every reader will pause at this paragraph, and think seriously of thrift and shiftlessness" (38). Making readers stop to think and to feel personally challenged by his words, Howe essentially calls out all readers by not identifying any names. Even if readers recognize thrift as careful frugality and shiftlessness as heedless indolence, they may not know in which categories their own actions fit. Howe believes everyone can increase industry and economy.

In *Country Town Sayings*, Howe proclaims: "Shiftless people leave things out in the rain, and then complain that nothing is made as strong and durable in these degenerate times as in the good old days" (21). Here he twists the convention that products are always made better in the past in order to remind readers that when laziness results in exposing farm or household implements out in the elements, the product will deteriorate no matter how well it is constructed. Howe makes fun of people who blame the times rather than themselves for the decline in quality. Ultimately in *Country Town Sayings*, Howe voices contempt for people who do not meet his standard of industry, saying, "Every shiftless man is a liar; he acquired the habit in giving excuses" (70). Howe never accepts excuses, believing that hard work will yield results.

Parallel with the contrast between thrift and shiftlessness is the contrast between order and chaos. Thrift requires order, associated with reassurance and planning, while shiftlessness brings the disorder people should find uncomfortable. The didactic mode of direct address is again apparent in *Country Town Sayings* when Howe advises: "Nothing pays so well as a little order and system in your affairs. You will be disturbed tonight because you neglected to do half a dozen things that you might have done easily with a little system" (219). Howe presents the tantalizing outcome of greater profit and better sleep for people who can just get more organized. As part of order, Howe urges prioritization: "No man has a right to spend money on beer, and then claim that times are so hard that he cannot pay his grocery and meat bills" (208). The humor results first from the specificity of the criticism and then the recognition readers feel when considering their own little luxuries that

are often unconsciously prioritized above essentials.

Howe's disapproval of alcohol abuse further exemplifies his criticism of chaos. The disorderliness of drink causes people to behave poorly and improvidently. As an editor, Howe publicly ridiculed people who got drunk, once even exposing his own son in a barb about the misdeeds of Atchison young men (Pickett 208). While Howe modeled moderation and viewed alcohol as a squandering of money, he and the *Globe* disagreed with legal prohibitions against alcohol in the state and nation (Pickett 152-156). The individual has the duty to make the wise choice of temperance rather than having choice removed. Howe phrases his principle in *Country Town Sayings* as follows: "A decent, industrious man is as sure to get along as a loafer and drunkard is sure to go to the devil" (201). Laziness and excessive drinking accompany one another as vices.

The contrast between thrift and shiftlessness arises again in *The Blessing of Business*, Howe's pamphlet from 1918. Howe announces that only individual effort can turn failure into success: "If a man is lazy, shiftless and unreliable, there is no power on earth that will make him prosperous and respected. If a man has bad habits, he must overcome them, or suffer the consequences" (34). Howe proposes less regulation: "Law cannot make the individual sensible, thrifty, and efficient; law may only prohibit, not prevent" (32). Howe has faith that an individual can make the choices—of duty, temperance, and honesty—necessary for success.

Character sketches in *The Anthology of Another Town* also indicate Howe's belief in individual choices and opposition to wastefulness. Harvey King "was reared in the shiftless manner too common in this town" and is now "hopelessly ruined at the age of thirty-six" (154). King "was born with a golden spoon in his mouth" but was "too kindly treated" and "did nothing until he was almost of age" (155). The influence of relatives secured him two jobs in business which he ruined "by neglect" and overspending (154). Another person in the town was also "notoriously spoiled by her parents" but turned out well because she married a man "from an old-fashioned family where the children were compelled to mind" (170). Martha Wendell is "an object lesson to shiftless young married women, since she was useful, sensible and a good wife and home maker," but the neighbor women think she is oppressed and criticize her husband, "though he asked nothing of his wife she should not have done" (170). Howe regularly directs his advice

of frugality toward women who manage the household.

Emanuel Strong, another character described in the *Anthology*, dies in poverty because, his wife admits, “she paid too much heed to the demands of the children and everything they earned slipped away” (160). Emanuel had been unable to save and had missed the opportunity to buy a good business because “he had no ready money” (160). Howe tells the story as if readers will learn frugality by hearing of someone else’s unfortunate situation. The importance not only of earning but also of saving or investing is present in the sketch of “Cap. Hansen,” who dies without any resources to leave for his family because “he had worked so hard to make money that he had neglected what he had” (112). As Howe avers in *Country Town Sayings*, “Carelessness is the great sin of Americans. Most men make enough money, but do not take care of it” (78). It may seem ironic that a man who lived as simply as Ed Howe wrote so passionately about the importance of acquiring and preserving wealth, but he also advised, “If you have an ambition to get rich, don’t let it kill every other ambition you have” (7).

“Success Easier Than Failure”: Howe’s Theory of Work

To claim that success is easier than failure seems counterintuitive. If Howe consistently argues for the necessity of constant industry, how then can success be easy? Samuel Sackett believes that the paradoxical nature of this slogan “was so contrary to the way most people find life that it probably repelled more readers than it attracted” (116). Yet Howe reveals that right actions will lead to the financial gain by which he defines success because industry brings wealth. He implies that hard work will seem easier in retrospect because it results in a better way of life. Howe’s writings express a fond belief in meritocracy and the free-market system. As Calder Pickett describes this philosophy, “failure has less morality about it” than success, and folks who are moral failures “have not seized upon their opportunities, but instead have *chosen* to be failures” (294, italics in original). Howe considered his views to be common sense, though he lived through the economic panic of 1893 and saw the nation in the Great Depression at the end of his life. Seeing the world as a simple place, Howe argues both that success is easier than failure and also that industry will be rewarded.

The book *Success Easier Than Failure* promoted Howe’s phrase in 1917.⁶ Central to Howe’s approach is the virtue of selfishness: “I never knew a selfish man who was in the poorhouse or the gutter” (63). To

Howe, the word *selfish* is positive, because the acquisitive instinct is natural and necessary. He instructs the reader, “The business of life is to Get. [...] Give of your store, certainly, but only those who are able to get are able to give” (37).⁷ He most admired successful businessmen such as John D. Rockefeller, although he found manifestations of the same entrepreneurial spirit in America’s small towns. Howe mentions the difference between selfishness and greed in *Ventures in Common Sense*: “If a man lays up fuel for winter, *that* isn’t greed; *that* is selfishness. Selfishness means behaving yourself in as many ways as possible” (253, italics in original).

In *The Blessing of Business* (1918), Howe argues that the rich have gotten their money from “thrift, good sense and hard work” (42). As in *Success Easier Than Failure*, he urges that business people should be in charge of the country and voices skepticism of people whose work product is not useful, namely professors, writers, and most politicians. A critic of the Social Gospel movement and of organized religion, Howe defends materialism: “Practically all writers and public speakers say materialism is dangerous to higher civilization; it is actually the only straight road to the highest civilization possible” (32). A committed Republican, Howe had faith that individual effort and a refusal to make excuses would lead to financial triumph.

This counterintuitive notion of “ease” regarding work is manifest in Howe’s collection of *Country Town Sayings*. When Howe writes, “Self-denial is easier, in the long run, than self-indulgence” (50), he may mean that self-denial grows easier with time or that it will seem easier because of the good results it yields. Relative ease appears in another aphorism from the collection: “It is easier to do your duty than it is to worry over neglect of it. Fifteen minutes work will fix the fence where the pig gets in. But if the break is neglected the pig will worry you every hour of the night and day” (177). The farming example of a broken fence demonstrates that it is more efficient and less stressful to handle problems as they arise rather than procrastinating. The counterintuitive use of ease similarly appears in the observation, “It is easier to rest too much than it is to work too much” (55). Howe may also want to suggest that work is less difficult and all-consuming than people presume, as when he reminds readers, “You hard-working people have lots of idle time you forget about” (42). The line begins as a compliment to the reader, who is assumed to be a hard worker, but the barb is the ending idea that people can forget how much down time they still have. Howe

maintains profound confidence in diligence: “If you patiently do your work the best you can, and worry and fret as little as possible, a great many good things will come your way when you least expect them” (89).

Numerous aphorisms in *Country Town Sayings* support the theme that hard work will be rewarded. Howe recognizes that the results of hard work do not come fast enough to suit most people: “When your ship comes in, if you are like most people, instead of being thankful, you will find fault with the captain for the delay” (57). The country-town philosophy of the editor is evoked in his admonition that success comes via diligence rather than short cuts:

“This Prosperity you hear so much about: no one will hand you your share of it in cash” (54).

“You can’t do up a rival by talking about him, and telling what a mean man he is. The only way to ‘do him up’ is to be more industrious than he is, and more polite, more agreeable and more honest in your dealings with the public” (37).

“The smartest thing you can do is to go to bed at 9 o’clock, and get up early the next morning, and spend the day modestly doing your duty. Don’t try to attract attention; those people who try to attract attention, never do” (58).

Howe extends Benjamin Franklin’s injunction that “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” His sentences are not constructed as memorably as Franklin’s, but he echoes the idea that success will come to a person who sets to the day early, goes to sleep early, and performs duties without flare but with accuracy.

Howe’s wit appears in the way he concisely skewers the instincts many people have that our good luck and self-confidence will lead to financial success. The gimmicky falseness of get-rich-quick schemes is never seen in Howe’s epigrams, despite the role of capricious fate in some novels. Nor does Howe credit luck and happenstance in *Country Town Sayings*: “You often hear of bull-headed luck. There is no such thing: it is bull-headed industry, bull-headed perseverance, bull-headed economy” (6). Sackett argues that the presence of “many examples of success achieved by luck” rather than by industry or thrift undermines the appeal of Howe’s “common sense” philosophy (115).

Emphasizing the necessity of constant application to duty and work,

the apt comparison of a person with a beast of burden works well in this epigram: “If a man takes one day off, it takes him about three days to get the harness fitted again” (27). Howe warns against dreaming when he observes that “Nearly every man has the fool habit of sitting in the shade, and wishing things, and believing that he is earnestly striving for them” (216). Howe instills the expectation that adversity must be overcome: “If you make money, you must make it in spite of hard times and unfavorable weather. For times are always hard, and weather is always too wet, too dry, too cold, or too warm” (146). As with Boxer in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the answer to all problems is that we must work harder, despite where it takes us in the inevitable end. Perhaps Howe knew from experience that just working at something and keeping occupied can help people to carry on through hard times.

In *The Anthology of Another Town*, the effective example of industry garners praise in adjacent character sketches of Henry Wulfburger, the iceman, and George Pendleton, a grocery store owner. Not only is Wulfburger a good businessman who “delivers ice promptly” (113); he is also a fine example for his assistant on the ice truck, Nate Salsbury, who “is learning more than the ice business. He is learning industry, politeness, honesty and efficiency from the example of Henry Wulfburger” (113). George Pendleton, the grocer, “was a tremendous worker” who accomplished good for the town as a result of wanting to increase profits and competition (114). Howe vaunts Pendleton for being so “selfish” that he “has actually done more for the town” than anyone else due to setting a good example, making prices more competitive, and building better facilities (114-115). Howe celebrates that “All this good was accomplished by a selfish man who had no other ambition than to make money” (114). Supposed self-centeredness becomes an asset that benefits the community as well as the individual.

In *The Story of a Country Town*, Howe hints that Jo Erring’s downfall can be attributed to a lack of industry. Jo initially seems to work hard, but “everybody said he came of a shiftless family” (129). He allows his livelihood and his life to be derailed by excessive jealousy and encroaching madness. Jo gives up hope when his marriage disintegrates, and Jo tells Ned, “I no longer care to succeed” (255). With the stabilizing power of work absent from his life, Jo is overpowered by pathological psychology, becoming a murderer then committing suicide in jail (392).

Samuel Sackett observes that critics tend to interpret *The Story of a*

Country Town with a focus on Ned's father John and his uncle Jo rather than on Ned, the first-person protagonist "who is the central character of the book and gives it unity" (48). Admittedly, the novel's tone conveys sadness and disappointment memorably, and the movement of the plot emphasizes fatal mistakes by supporting characters. I argue that missing the success of the industrious worker so essential to the end of *The Story of a Country Town* makes scholars overlook the consistency of Howe's economic philosophy throughout his publishing career.

In contrast to Jo's failure, Ned Westlock succeeds through industrious labor as a newspaper printer and editor. Ned follows through on the good work ethic instilled by his harsh father and avoids crime. In the novel's conclusion, Ned "is worth considerable money" and has married Agnes Deming, the only woman he ever loved (411). Like Big Adam Casebolt, who has also gained financial independence in the novel's conclusion, Ned has made a success despite challenges. Thus, the conclusion of *The Story of a Country Town* demonstrates the reward of hard-working, virtuous characters with material success and personal happiness.

A New Era for Study of E. W. Howe

The most scathing criticism published about Howe in his lifetime demonstrates the strong response Howe can evoke. Six months after the news of Howe's final retirement, which had been heralded by a positive notice in *The Nation*, critic Ernest Boyd wrote in the book section of *The Nation* in 1934 using quotations from the collection *Ventures in Common Sense* (1919) to condemn Howe's philosophic legacy. Boyd states that Howe promoted conformity and could not see excellence (248). He laments that Howe apparently believes "profiteering is the only motive for human action" (Boyd 247). Perhaps referring to Howe's age of over eighty, Boyd claims that the "fundamental falsity" of Howe's views, as excerpted in the article, "has been obvious to every thinking person since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, at least" (247). Boyd would suppose that Howe's ideas do not even "merit serious discussion" except that, for reasons beyond Boyd's comprehension, the ideas have been endorsed by "many who would revolt at such piffle if uttered by a Congressman, a popular preacher, or a public-relations counsel" (247). Certainly, readers such as Boyd did not find Howe's views to be simple "common sense."

The perception of thrift as virtue in the United States was already waning by the time Howe began attempting to bolster it. His arguments

could scarcely combat national trends, nor could his confidence that free market capitalism regulates all systems slow the economic depression into which the nation was sinking at the end of his lifetime. In *The Decline of Thrift in America* (1991), scholar David Tucker argues that the virtue of thrift became devalued in the 1880s during a backlash against thrifty “immigrants who lived on less and worked for cheaper wages” (101). Practices for managing lack caused economists to demonize thrift as undermining the national economy. New ideals of consumerism and higher standards of living dominated by the 1950s. Thrift was long buried before our current era of global economic crisis, and perhaps it is past time to bring back frugality.⁸ But even though no manner of individual thrift or industry will be enough alone to solve the current crisis, it is timely to reflect on the “horse sense” values of “homespun philosophy” (Blair vii) that Howe expressed in print throughout his lifetime.⁹

The “crackerbox philosopher” and “Sage of Potato Hill” from Atchison, Kansas offers substance as well as humor in his writings. His writing blurs the distinctions between fact and fiction. The interest that his witty paragraphs, fictions, and stories hold for readers today indicates that E. W. Howe deserves a continued place within American literature. Industry in “the business of life” was his most consistent subject. For fifty years, Howe expressed confident views regarding work despite variations in the American economy. His philosophy of industry is presented in his fiction and nonfiction writings, including *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), *Country Town Sayings* (1911), *Success Easier Than Failure* (1917), *The Blessing of Business* (1918), and *The Anthology of Another Town* (1920). Howe promotes thrift and economy, opposing shiftlessness or a lack of diligence. He urges order in place of chaos and selfishness rather than excuses. Moreover, Howe claims that success is “easier than failure” and argues that industry always brings rewards. Finally, Howe motivates his fellow citizens to work harder, even when we think we are already doing so. As he writes in *Country Town Sayings*, “I never drove a horse in my life that it didn’t make me feel that I was driving it too hard” (45).

Works Cited

- Anderson, David D. "The Old Northwest, the Midwest, and the Making of Three American Iconoclasts." *Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce*. Ed. Cathy Davidson. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982. 96-113.
- Blair, Walter. *Horse Sense in American Humor*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1942.
- Boyd, Ernest. "The Sage of Potato Hill." *The Nation* 139 (29 August 1934): 247-248.
- Bucco, Martin. *E. W. Howe*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Western Writers Series, 1977.
- Cummins, Amy. "Playground in a Graveyard: The Achievement of E. W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town*." *Kansas English* 92.1 (Spring 2008): 45-59.
- Gibbs, Nancy. "Real Patriots Don't Spend." *Time* 13 October 2008: 96.
- Howe, Edgar Watson. *The Anthology of Another Town*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1920.
- . *The Blessing of Business*. Topeka: Crane, 1918.
- . *Country Town Sayings: A Collection of Paragraphs from the Atchison Globe*. Topeka: Crane and Co., 1911.
- . *The Story of a Country Town*. 1883. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917.
- . *Success Easier Than Failure*. Topeka: Crane, 1917.
- . *Ventures in Common Sense*. Introd. H. L. Mencken. New York: Knopf, 1924.
- Howells, William Dean. "Two Notable Novels." *Century* 28 (August 1884): 632-634.
- Nevins, Allan, ed. *American Press Opinion, Washington to Coolidge: A Documentary Record of Editorial Leadership and Criticism, 1785-1927*. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1928.
- Pickett, Calder. *Ed Howe: Country Town Philosopher*. Lawrence: U P of Kansas, 1968.
- Sackett, Samuel John. *E. W. Howe*. New York: Twayne, 1972.
- Schorer, C. E. "Mark Twain's Criticism of *The Story of a Country Town*." *American Literature* 27.1 (March 1955): 109-112.
- Scudder, Horace E. "Recent American Fiction." *Atlantic Monthly* 55 (January 1885): 121-132.
- Tandy, Jennette. *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire*. New York: Columbia U P, 1925.
- Tucker, David M. *The Decline of Thrift in America: Our Cultural Shift from Saving to Spending*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1991.
- Yates, Norris W. *The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century*. Ames, IA: Iowa State U P, 1964.

Endnotes

- 1 David Anderson argues that similar biographical elements influenced the developments of Edgar Watson Howe, Ambrose Bierce, and Thomas Ingersoll, iconoclasts born within a span of two decades. Each man experienced “paternal failure,” rejected the father’s religious faith, made decisive breaks with their pasts in their teenage years, and “sought a means—like Lincoln, in the new towns rather than on the farms—whereby he, unlike his father, might rise, in which his voice could be heard and perhaps his fortune made” (98-99).
- 2 Two works from the last revival of critical interest in Howe remain essential reading: Calder Pickett’s *Ed Howe: Country Town Philosopher* (1968) and Samuel Sackett’s *E. W. Howe* (1972) in the Twayne Series on United States Authors.
- 3 The opening story in *The Anthology of Another Town*, for example, is one Howe often recounted about the time he and his half-brother Jim sneaked out to see the circus in 1864 (Pickett 12, 39). *The Anthology of Another Town* (1920), an excellent collection of fiction, is a compilation of short sketches titled by character name and varying in length from a few sentences to full-length tales, some based directly on events in Howe’s life. In format, the book was inspired partly by Edgar Lee Masters’s 1915 poetry collection *Spoon River Anthology*.
- 4 According to scholar Martin Bucco, Howe’s aphoristic tendency weakens the structure of his poorly received later novels; Bucco phrases the problem in reference to Howe’s fifth novel, *An Ante-Mortem Statement*, “As the stubborn narrator crosses each plank of concentrated wisdom, he cunningly sets it on fire, madly burning the bridge of life behind him” (35).
- 5 While critics William Dean Howells and Horace Scudder both celebrated the humorous characterization of Lytle Biggs, among other elements of *The Story of a Country Town*, Mark Twain thought the character of Biggs “interrupt[ed] the story” yet praised Big Adam as “a mighty figure” in American literature (Scudder 126-127, Twain rpt. in Schorer 110-111).
- 6 Howe liked the phrase so well that he used it as the main title of a different book published in 1927, *Success Easier than Failure: The Preaching of a Brother-in-Law of the Church* (Sackett 108). This later publication promoted the slogan even more, because the Haldeman-Julius “Little Blue Book” series of cheap, compact works of fiction and nonfiction was consumed by a widespread popular audience.
- 7 In *Country Town Sayings*, Howe reminds readers that charity does not require wealth: “How easy to ‘wish’ for a million dollars to give to your friends! Why not give them the five dollars you have?” (94).
- 8 Nancy Gibbs writes in favor of renewed frugality in a column for *Time* magazine on 13 October 2008 titled “Real Patriots Don’t Spend” (96). Gibbs claims that “profligacy” has “replaced prudence as a patriotic duty” and that “we’ve been living large for so long that solvency feels like a sacrifice” (96).
- 9 The author thanks Shawn Thomson for discussions about Howe and his homespun philosophy and acknowledges the Department of English at Fort Hays State University for support of research on Edgar Watson Howe.