

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

A Novelist Remembers:  
*Memoirs of Grace Flandrau*

SEE BOOK REVIEWS

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Winter, 2004

Volume 38, Number 4

*'He Loved a Tall Tale'*

The Life and Times of I. A. O'Shaughnessy—  
The Man Who Happily Gave His Money Away

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Portrait of I. A. O'Shaughnessy painted by artist Frank Bensing. From the University of St. Thomas Special Collections.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 38, Number 4

Winter, 2004

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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## Message from the President of Ramsey County Historical Society

Anyone who has spent some time in St. Paul has probably come across the name O'Shaughnessy. It may have been on the facade of a building at the University of St. Thomas, or on the campus of the College of St. Catherine, or perhaps somewhere else in the local area. Many who have seen the O'Shaughnessy name in our capital city have a vague awareness that he was a generous benefactor, especially of educational institutions. Yet if you were to ask any number of individuals who O'Shaughnessy was, in all likelihood few would be able to tell you more about the man than his initials: I. A.

I. A. O'Shaughnessy was born in Stillwater, Minnesota, in 1885, but beginning in 1928, he and his wife, Lillian, made their home and raised their family in St. Paul. I. A., however, made his fortune in the oil refining business outside Minnesota. Consequently he was often away from their Summit Avenue residence tending to his many business activities in Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois, or Washington, D.C. Thus I. A. O'Shaughnessy was less well known in his home community than he deserved.

In this issue, authors John M. Lindley and Virginia Brainard Kunz have combined their talents to provide the first wide-ranging biographical profile of I. A. O'Shaughnessy's life, business career, and personal and institutional philanthropy. They have used many documentary, business, family, and institutional records as well as extensive interviews with O'Shaughnessy family members and others who knew I. A. in writing this profile. The Ramsey County Historical Society hopes that the readers of our history quarterly will find that these authors have not only shed much light on the little-known career of the man who was once honored with the title of "Mr. St. Paul—A Great St. Paulite," but have also heightened local awareness of his great generosity to people and institutions in St. Paul and around the nation.

*Marlene Marschall, President, Ramsey County Historical Society*

# Books

## *Memoirs of Grace Flandrau*

Edited by Georgia Ray  
St. Paul: Knoche Beg Press, 2003  
Reviewed by Steve Trimble

Author Grace Flandrau (1886-1971) once commented on the inspiring relationship between living and writing, saying that there was “a great incentive to experience deeply, to feel with sympathy and integrity, so that the reflection of our lives and of ourselves may be worthy of the offering that we, by writing, make of them to the world.”

Unfortunately the life, literature, and non-fiction offerings of this once famed St. Paul writer have been almost forgotten. But Georgia Ray, a writer of local history and biography, has been carrying on a one-woman effort to correct this literary oversight. For over a decade she has been diligently researching a major work that will trace the life and times of Grace Flandrau. This 123-page volume is a first step in Ray’s journey.

Flandrau wrote several highly-regarded novels in the 1920s, including *Being Respectable*, and contributed short stories to many prominent magazines. Unlike her contemporary, F. Scott Fitzgerald, the bulk of her fictional efforts were set St. Paul, but her non-fiction best seller, *Then I Saw the Congo*, described a six-month-long trek in Africa.

After she gained prominence, the Great Northern Railway hired her to produce a series of booklets on the opening of the frontier. Following World War II, Flandrau abandoned fiction for journalism and public speaking. She also had a radio show and a weekly column in a St. Paul paper.

The memoirs reviewed here were discovered by Georgia Ray in the late

1980s in Flandrau family papers in the Arizona Historical Society. They were composed of drafts revised in the 1930s and 1940s when Flandrau was in her fifties. Her original idea was to expand them into an autobiographical work, but her editor thought she should concentrate on fiction. They were set aside and ignored. Until now.

*The Memoirs of Grace Flandrau* is divided into three sections. The first is called “Child Memories.” As a young St. Paul girl, she was the poet, the performer and the “pampered favorite” of a somewhat tyrannical “Victorian patriarch.” Describing her childhood as “anomalous,” Flandrau remembered episodes of self-indulgence and family favoritism. The youngster was an avid tree climber and a voracious reader who was often called upon to recite and perform.

The household was unorthodox, especially in its economics. It was always close to poverty but even when it was difficult to provide the necessities, money was spent on luxuries, such as a French governess or an expensive violin for Grace. Following the 1893 depression and a local bank crash, the family tottered on the brink of insolvency.

After the turn-of-the-century, Grace lived in Europe with her mother and in a French boarding school. She returned to Minnesota in 1903, shortly before her father died. Several pages detail a thirty-five-mile railroad journey to a small town to visit the grave of her father and to ponder the meaning of life

“Memories of a French School,” describes Flandrau’s two years at a French boarding school and is the most extensive section of the book. It covers the physical setting, the ancient structure’s dampness, the lack of electricity above the ground floor, and unheated bed-

rooms without bathtubs.

The school was run by a teaching order of nuns. It had one section reserved for French girls and the other for foreigners, including students from England, Russia, Rumania, Norway, and Haiti. While Grace later valued the language training, she felt the other academic offerings left much to be desired. Flandrau made a friend or two, but mostly felt isolated and introspective. She recalled being alone at Christmas and Easter when other students left to stay with relatives. She had no pocket money for any outings or personal spending. Other more positive passages describe the beauty of the French countryside which she witnessed while attending a small town feast of the Virgin Mary.

There was a secretive friendship with a maid named Suzy, who was dismissed for too much fraternizing with Flandrau. One of the teachers took an interest in her, attempted to convert her to Catholicism, and also seems to have tried to initiate a romantic involvement.

The final section, “Mexican Memory,” presents some of her experiences as a young bride living on an isolated coffee plantation. At nineteen years of age, she married William Blair Flandrau, a member of a prominent St. Paul family. Like other businessmen at the time, he had invested in the Mexican enterprise he and his bride hoped would be a great adventure.

After arriving in a small Mexican town, they still needed to make a two-day trek through the mountains on a narrow muddy trail that crossed two large rivers. Unfortunately, the two were soon forced to flee back home because of the onset of the Mexican Revolution. They returned to St. Paul to live with

her father-in-law, Charles Flandrau, in his Pleasant Avenue home where Grace began to write professionally.

Like her other works, the unfinished memoirs show a keen eye for details, an attention to landscape and characters, and are laid out in an elegant style. One interesting thread in all three sections is Flandrau's recollections not just of sights but also sounds and other senses.

On a Minnesota farm, for instance, she relates the "smells of frying pans, and perspiration," of boiling coffee and "the sour smell of a baby." In the French school, she was surrounded with "the smell of old people mixed with the scent of food and coal gas." In the small town of Jalapa, Mexico, there was "always the smell of coffee, wetness, green things and tropical flowers in bloom."

Flandrau stated that writing had to be truthful, but that it had to be "your own truth, your own entire response as an individual to people and ideas and circumstances—what you see when you look out through the colored glasses of your own unique temperament." People who want to gain a greater understanding of what she meant would do well to read the *Memoirs of Grace Flandrau* while they are awaiting Georgia Ray's promised full-length biography of Grace Flandrau.

*Steve Trimble is an urban historian and a former state legislator who teaches at Metropolitan University*

### *Fire & Ice—The History of the Saint Paul Winter Carnival*

Moira F. Harris

Preface by Gareth Hiebert, epilogue by Robert Viking

153 pages with bibliography, index, photos

Pogo Press, St. Paul

*Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz*

This spritely book, larded with dozens and dozens of photographs, many of them in color, is not just a history of St. Paul's beloved winter "fair." The author tells the story against the backdrop of the many civic festivals



that have colored the history of the nation since the latter years of the nineteenth century.

In those years after the Civil War, she notes, civic leaders around the country embraced the idea of a carnival that would draw attention, publicity, and tourists with money in their pockets to their community. Harris traces the first discussion of a St. Paul winter carnival to a meeting in the "brand new" Ryan Hotel on November 2, 1885. "Forty or more gentlemen were invited," she writes, and it is scarcely surprising that most of them were founders or proprietors of the city's principal businesses. She credits the idea of a carnival to George Thompson, publisher of the *St. Paul Dispatch*. H. J. Fairchild, who would later serve on the Winter Carnival's board of directors, summarized the enthusiastic response.

It was, he told the *St. Paul Globe*, "the first proposition of a public nature he ever knew that was not opposed by somebody." It was no fault of those founders that after a memorable launching, the Carnival stumbled, done in periodically by the vicissitudes of Minne-

sota's weather, plus the imponderables of national (the Great Depression) and international events (two World Wars). Harris leads readers through the ups and downs of the early carnivals, their resurrection under Louis Hill in 1916, and their popularity as the major events of the many winters since then.

Some of Harris's account is familiar to Winter Carnival aficionados, but the photographs, even those in black and white, evoke eras that have passed from memory for many readers of today. Here we see the floats—many carnival parades had between fifteen and thirty, Harris writes. And the beautiful ice palaces, those that were built and those that were not. The 1886 ice palace was the first in the nation, and according to Larry Millett, author of *Lost Twin Cities*, "The only building type for which the city was to become famous."

This book is for those who remember, and those who are too young to remember.

*Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History, and author of several histories of St. Paul.*



*A crane installs the Globe Oil & Refining Company sign at the company's McPherson, Kansas, refinery in 1933. Photo reproduced by permission from the private collections of the Lario Oil & Gas Company. See article beginning on page 4.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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