Chase S. Osborn was without doubt one of Michigan’s all-time most interesting citizens. Colorful, outspoken, and unconventional, he enlivened the Michigan political scene for many of his ninety years.

Fortunately, this Michigan eccentric left us a detailed portrait of himself through his amazingly complete collection of personal, business, and professional correspondence as well as numerous volumes of scrapbooks, diaries, and photographs. A newspaperman himself, he was meticulously covered by the press, thus adding extensive clipping files to his already voluminous collection of personal and professional memorabilia. These rich holdings, along with collateral materials relating to Osborn, are carefully preserved in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan and are supplemented by a smaller collection of his papers in the State Archives at Lansing.

Adding another dimension to our knowledge of Chase Salmon Osborn is his autobiography, *The Iron Hunter*, published in May 1919 and, after being out of print for over eighty years, now made available by the Wayne State University Press. *The Iron Hunter* gives us further insight into Osborn’s colorful personality and his significant career, revealing much of his independent spirit, high energy, unconventional values, and eccentricity. Chase Osborn was indeed something of a character. He fit no regular mold, and he marched to his own drumbeat. This book gives us a vivid, personal portrait of one of Michigan’s most unconventional citizens.

In 1910, Osborn was elected to Michigan’s highest executive
office. On January 1, 1911, he became governor of the state, although since January 1 was a Sunday, he was not sworn in until the following day. His governorship lasted only two years, but his brief term of office was significant since it came in the midst of a movement for reform which was spreading throughout the United States. Labeled the “Progressive Movement” by historians, it provided the perfect milieu for this flamboyant, reform-minded governor.

*The Iron Hunter* discusses Osborn’s political career and the background for his political involvement. It depicts the corruption and manipulation of the political process, a game in which, early in his career, he was a participant. As his career developed, however, he became more public spirited and more of a reformer. Osborn tells of his political adventures, his losses as well as his victories. In the loss category were an unsuccessful race for the U.S. Congress and a contest to succeed Hazen S. Pingree as governor of Michigan. On the win side, he was appointed state game and fish warden, state railroad commissioner, and regent of the University of Michigan, where he played a role in selecting President Harry B. Hutchins. Osborn also tells of his connection with U.S. senator and cabinet member from Michigan, Russel A. Alger, and covers the reform administration of Hazen Pingree.

Yet of the most interest is his account of his race for the governorship in 1910. He ran a flamboyant and innovative campaign, visiting every county of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula by automobile, the first such extensive use of the automobile in the state. His vigorous campaign brought him victory, and he became the state’s first (and to this date, only) governor from the Upper Peninsula.

One can only wish, however, that Osborn had described his governorship as vividly as he describes his campaign. He discusses the highlights of his administration, but leaves the reader wishing for more information on his frequent and fierce battles with his political and legislative foes. Still, he does, as one would expect of any politician, highlight his triumphs. While in the
governor’s office he eliminated Michigan’s deficit, ended corruption by appointing strong, civic-minded civil servants, and produced a strong body of progressive, reform-minded legislation which included the state’s first workmen’s compensation law and a reform of the electoral process.

A particularly interesting and significant section summarizes Osborn’s influential role in the 1912 national election, where he exercised leadership in persuading former president Theodore Roosevelt to enter the contest. He subsequently went on the stump for him in his unsuccessful campaign, which led to the defeat of William Howard Taft and the election of Woodrow Wilson. Osborn covers his own race for a second term as governor in 1914, but does not explain that his defeat was largely caused by the split in the Republican Party by the Bull Moose faction, a break he had tried to prevent.

Politics, however, is only one theme of this autobiography. Osborn relives for us his early Indiana boyhood, where he “learned to cradle, rake, bind, mow, stack hay and grain, load hay, rive clapboards, split rails and chop cordwood.” At the same time, he managed to “read just about everything I could get my hands on. . . . At an early age, too early, I had read Gray’s ‘Anatomy,’ Dalton’s physiology, Thomas on ‘Diseases of Women and Children,’ pages of Dunglison’s medical dictionary. Gully’s and also Shew’s hydropathy.”

Yet neither his physical labors nor his intellectual pursuits could quell the wanderlust in the young Osborn, for “I kept at running away two or three times a year until I succeeded. . . . My longest runaway absence was when I went into the wild Michigan lumber woods. . . . I spent a winter in the camps as a cookee and chore boy.”

He eventually wandered back to his native Indiana, however, and at the age of fourteen was admitted to Purdue University. After three years there he “vowed to leave school for good.” He took to the road again, setting out to walk to Chicago, the mecca of many Hoosier lads. He arrived with fifteen cents to his name and went to work as a potato peeler in a restaurant. Chicago did
not turn out to be the Promised Land, so he walked on to Milwaukee, which offered him no more than Chicago. He walked on to Green Bay, where he drove a coal wagon by day and unloaded ships by night. His luck changed when he got a job soliciting subscriptions for a newspaper and then eventually became a reporter, first in Milwaukee and then in Florence, Wisconsin.

It was in Florence that he became interested in iron ore and "began a systematic study of iron ore exploration in all of its practical and scientific places." The Iron Hunter was born. His explorations took him to exotic sites around the world, from South America to Lapland, from Spitsbergen to Madagascar. He achieved considerable success in discovering important iron deposits, providing him with a foundation for lifetime financial security.

Osborn's iron hunting gradually focused on Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the Canadian wilderness. "Up and down mountains, through swamps of spruce and tamarac, along stream valleys, and around lakes" went the Iron Hunter, and as he tramped the wilderness in search of iron formations, he became enamored of the raw, unrefined beauty of the Lake Superior country. His strong love of nature and its rugged beauty is clearly reflected in his autobiography. He writes vividly of streams "wicked in their fury" and eloquently of "beds of delicate, black-stalked maiden hair fern." The vegetation, the birds, the animals, the forests all became a part of him, and he found a home for life in the "Soo country."

Newspaperman, outdoorsman, adventurer, iron hunter, and politician—all facets of this complex man are revealed in his autobiography. Yet this book was written before he reached his sixtieth birthday. For another thirty years he lived the life of adventure, romance, and public engagement. He was a frequent speaker at all kinds of events. He continued writing and publishing. His support of liberal causes became stronger, regardless of the fact that these causes sometimes created problems in his Republican Party. His world travels and the impact of two world
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wars made him a strong internationalist and eventually a supporter of the United Nations, to the extent of initiating a quixotic movement to locate the UN headquarters on the Canadian-American border at his summer home of Duck Island, near Sault Ste. Marie.

His interest in the outdoors continued through his later years, and he helped promote the creation of Michigan’s first national park on Isle Royale. Always a dreamer, he led a movement to span the Straits of Mackinac with a bridge, a dream that did not reach fruition until after his death, when Michigan’s two peninsulas were united by the Mackinac Bridge.

Osborn’s life was not all iron ore and politics, however. There was time for romance, of sorts. In 1921, as one of his many philanthropies, Osborn gave $5000 to the University of Michigan to bring the already famous New England poet Robert Frost to Ann Arbor for the 1921–22 academic year. A young English major and aspiring poet, Stella Brunt, was so thrilled with Frost’s presence on campus that she wrote Osborn a sincere and heartfelt expression of thanks for so enriching her literary life at Michigan. Touched by her letter, Osborn replied warmly. Thus began a correspondence that led to a rather unusual relationship. Osborn invited Stella to visit him at his summer camp on Duck Island. Although he later withdrew the invitation because of illness, the correspondence continued. By 1924 the couple were on a first name basis and were seeing each other regularly.

In 1927 Stella worked for Osborn briefly, and in 1931 she became his full-time secretary. In that same year, Osborn, always the master of the unexpected, adopted Stella Brunt and renamed her Stellanova—new star. From that point on, their careers and lives were joined permanently. They shared literary projects, travel, friends, and a home—Possum Poke, Georgia, in the winter and Duck Island, Michigan, in the summer.

On April 11, 1949, Chase S. Osborn died. At his death he left behind not a grieving daughter but a grieving widow. On April 9, two days before his death, he had had the adoption annulled and had married Stellanova. The new Mrs. Osborn (the former
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Mrs. Osborn having died in February 1948) lived an active life until her death in 1988, almost forty years after the death of her father/husband. She pursued her literary projects and was active in the movement to unite western democracies—the International Movement for Atlantic Union. Chase Salmon Osborn and Stellanova Brunt Osborn are buried together on Duck Island in Osborn’s beloved north country and not far from Stellanova’s native Canada.

Readers of The Iron Hunter should not view it as a definitive study of one of Michigan’s leading citizens but as a period piece about a romantic adventurer, a sometimes politician, and a self-appointed philosopher. The reader should be forewarned that Osborn, although often ahead of his fellow citizens in his politics and the conventions of life, was very much a part of his era in at least one respect. Like many of the white establishment of his time, he freely and unapologetically used racial terms which grate on the ear of the modern reader.

Yet read and enjoy Osborn and his story for what it is—a colorful, sometimes exaggerated, and often egotistical account of the life of an interesting, unconventional man who carved out an extraordinary career in a world that perhaps was not quite ready for him.

Robert M. Warner
University Historian, Dean and Professor Emeritus
The University of Michigan