

Progressivism

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Book Reviews

Progressivism, by John D. Buenker, John C. Burnham, and Robert M. Crunden. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1977. pp. viii, 152. \$7.95.

Several years ago Robert Crunden wrote for *The Annals of Iowa* an article in which he argued that American reform in the years 1890-1918 was energized less by socio-economic forces than by religious fervor. Using the career of Iowa's social gospel minister George Herron as an example, Crunden showed how, in effect, "political life in the period became a great morality play," in which "Christian people of evangelical Protestant background came to terms with modern industrial and social conditions." In his book, Crunden joins two other historians to consider the merits of this view and several other leading interpretations of the Progressive Era. The book's authors share little more than an interest in turn-of-the-century American reform: theirs is not a work of synthesis. Each writer has contributed his own interpretive essay, spelling out what he believes to be the major themes of the period, the distinguishing traits of its men and women, and the best of the recent literature on the subject.

Crunden's essay considers the early careers of Jane Addams and John Dewey. Though not usually treated as "religious" reformers, the leader of Hull-House and the founder of the progressive school devoted their careers to the "moral rejuvenation of society." According to Crunden, adolescent religious experiences shaped the reformist sensibilities of these two Progressives by creating personal psychological conflicts that Addams and Dewey were later able to resolve in socially beneficial ways. Addams' settlement house and Dewey's school served as models for other Progressives and for the nation as a whole: each was a "public enactment of the Protestant morals that dominated in so many households of the later nineteenth century."

John Burnham gives as much attention to the scientific enthusiasms of the Progressive Era as to the religious backgrounds of its leading personalities. Burnham's essay, perhaps the weakest in the book, argues that during the early years of the present century Americans tried to combine the wisdom of scientific method and the humanism of evangelical religion in solving the

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problems of an urban, industrial social order. Older values, including traditional ideals of family, nation, and morality, became touchstones of public policy-making, providing the experts and the electorate new standards by which to judge the efficacy of specific Progressive reforms. Unfortunately, Burnham has chosen to document this interesting idea more frequently with the comments of historians than with statements by Progressives themselves so that the reader is hard put to judge whether his claims can be corroborated by historical evidence.

John Buenker's essay focuses on the "shifting coalitions" that made for the Progressives' considerable legislative accomplishments and argues that the era's principal legacy was a distinctively pluralist political style. When faced with a plethora of social problems created by recent industrialization and urbanization, each of which affected the nation's various ethnic and socio-economic groups in different ways, the political leaders of the Progressive Era were forced to "compromise, coalesce, and cooperate" to get results. In the process, they began to develop the means whereby "profound social change" might be accomplished without violence or injustice. Buenker, whose range is narrower than those of his collaborators, has written an essay that is well documented and generally convincing.

In addition to extensive bibliographies, the essays are followed by rejoinders in which each writer has a chance to comment on the work of his collaborators and to defend his own essay in light of their criticisms. This refreshing format, highlighting the personal exchange so important to historical research, creates a mood similar to that of professional meetings. Readers of *Progressivism*, like conventioners, will not leave with definitive answers to the major issues in Progressive-Era historiography but they will learn much about recent research in the field and get a good idea of the work that remains to be done.

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