

Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy

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Hawley. Hoover revisionism is not monolithic, of course, and several species are exhibited.

The anthology is impaired by some familiar generic faults of execution and design. One example is the five-to-ten-year delay in publication of the symposium essays, with the predictable consequences. Although not necessarily novel, the essays addressed issues and had insights of immediacy when initially presented. Little in the anthology, however, has not by now become some kind of staple in Hoover historiography; and revisionism has progressed beyond the phase reflected in these essays. It is not simply that the collection can be viewed as somewhat passé, but that it has few perspectives that are not available and often stated with stronger cogency elsewhere. Even those essays with an anticipatory germ have been superseded. Later comparable writing, for example, by Gary Dean Best and George H. Nash is definitely superior to their essays in this volume. This anthology does not qualify, therefore, as a source of singular writings on Hoover.

Any of its limitations, however, could have been transcended with adequate context. Many essays contained once advanced revisionist notions and some striking interpretations, but the reader can merely ponder their significance in the absence of any explanation of the evolution of Hoover historiography. Among the advantages of the symposium format is that it affords a context that is often as instructive and riveting as the essays. That context, however, is only hinted at. The editor mentions, for example, that Burner and Hawley entered a "stimulating public dialog—nearly a debate—on their divergent viewpoints" (xii) at the 1980 symposium, but the reader is spared the details. Conveying a sense of the symposium context could have been didactic, earned grateful readers, and invested the anthology with a unique feature.

These remarks are not intended to disparage the authors. Essays like these rescued Hoover from unjust ignominy and malicious judgment, and they were entitled to a better forum. A record of the symposia was fitting and could have had considerable utility, but this particular anthology has limited benefit to posterity.

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

PATRICK G. O'BRIEN

Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy, by George McJimsey. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. xiv, 474 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$25.00 cloth.

George McJimsey, professor of history at Iowa State University, has provided the first major study of Harry Hopkins since Searle Charles's

Minister of Relief in 1963. McJimsey began, he tells us, with the idea of updating Robert Sherwood's *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (1948). But as research proceeded, he abandoned this goal, and the work took on its own distinctive themes and emphases. Still, as in Sherwood's book, the bulk of the study (fifteen of twenty-three chapters) is concerned with Hopkins's activities during World War II. Although it adds in important ways to our knowledge and understanding of Hopkins prior to 1940, the major contribution intended is a detailed reconstruction and evaluation of the Hopkins who became democracy's "grand vizier" and functioned in that capacity as a combination troubleshooter, expeditor, and presidential agent.

In the first eight chapters, McJimsey focuses in turn on Hopkins's upbringing in small-town Iowa, the importance of Grinnell College in shaping his values, his success as a professional social work administrator, and his activities as the New Deal's "minister of relief" and an increasingly prominent member of Roosevelt's inner circle. In doing so, McJimsey covers much that is familiar. But he also provides much fresh information, especially about Hopkins's social work career and administrative style. He also shows in detail the qualities and factors that combined to make Hopkins a recognized "administrative genius." Among these were his aptitude for "crisis management," his mastery of appropriate organizational and processing skills, his ability to create a sense of collegiality and organizational mission, his peculiar blend of likableness and decisiveness, and his development of a bureaucratic power base grounded in presidential support and connections to the social work community and the urban political machines. Interestingly, the path he took to administrative effectiveness differed greatly from those taken by such bureaucratic empire-builders as Harold Ickes, Henry Wallace, and Jesse Jones. But he was able to hold his own in the political arenas created by Roosevelt's penchant for administration by conflict.

In the chapters on the war period, McJimsey reconstructs the position that Hopkins came to occupy after he moved into the Lincoln Room of the White House, details the service he performed for Roosevelt and the nation, and provides numerous examples of his talents as troubleshooter, expeditor, negotiator, and presidential handyman. Again, much of this is familiar. But there are fresh details and modified perspectives drawn from documents not previously available and from a critical reading of work done on the figures with whom Hopkins interacted. And essentially new are the fascinating accounts that McJimsey gives us of Hopkins's role as allocator and expeditor of war supplies, his exercise of informal coordination through the individuals collectively known as the Hopkins Shop, and his success in

1944 in acquiring a power base in the State Department. These do alter substantially the picture we have had of Hopkins's role in war management and inter-Allied diplomacy.

McJimsey's overall depiction of Hopkins is a generally positive one. He finds little evidence to support the negative portraits painted by Hopkins's political enemies; and he sees Hopkins, generally speaking, as "democracy's bureaucrat"—as a man, in other words, of genuine compassion, moral integrity, pragmatic disposition, and useful intuitive gifts, who sought power not for domination but to do democracy's jobs, and who combined devotion and loyalty to a democratic leader with appropriate measures of creative independence, political sophistication, and irreverent unconventionality. McJimsey is careful, however, not to exaggerate Hopkins's importance, and he makes no effort to conceal the contradictions, failures, and less positive traits that were also a part of the man and his life. He notes, for example, that the ally of the poor also loved first-class treatment for himself; that the great inspirer of coworkers had great difficulty in achieving satisfying family relationships; that the skilled practitioner of bureaucratic politics made blunder after blunder when he tried to become a viable presidential contender; and that several of Hopkins's wartime schemes (most notably those for a Combined Production and Resources Board and a Munitions Assignments Board) were ill considered and led to administrative failure.

In an early section of the book, McJimsey also assesses the Iowa influence on Hopkins. Hopkins believed that he had left behind a center for "conservative narrow-mindedness" (4). Yet McJimsey shows how much of small-town Iowa Hopkins had unconsciously taken with him. That influence was apparent, McJimsey says, in his lack of pretense or concern about social position, in values derived from an "egalitarian neighborliness" and "neighborly sociability," and in his "satisfaction in beating the pompous and self-important at their own game" (5). Also influential in his development, McJimsey argues, was the example of his older sister, Adah, who had become a professional social worker and had pioneered in organizing Iowa's own brand of public-private cooperation in the welfare field.

Such criticisms as can be made of McJimsey's work are related primarily to his decision to devote two-thirds of it to the last six years of Hopkins's life. In the relatively brief New Deal sections, one often feels the need for more context and for greater engagement with relevant historiographical controversies. Nothing is said, for example, about the radical reinterpretation of the Civil Works Administration set forth in Bonnie Fox Schwartz's recent work. But when one reaches the war period, one finds a text that tends toward the opposite extreme and in

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places becomes so cluttered with general war history and policy-making details that it ceases to be very satisfying as biography. The problem of writing about a period filled with great men and great events while maintaining a focus on Hopkins has obviously been a difficult one, and it has not been entirely solved.

Still, the book's excellences far outweigh its defects. It is solidly and extensively researched, engagingly written, persuasively argued, and successful in developing an insightful and convincing portrait of a fascinating and important historical figure. It is likely to be the standard work on its subject for some time to come.

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

ELLIS W. HAWLEY

Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series, edited by Archie Hobson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. xviii, 391 pp. Index, illustrations. \$24.95 cloth.

The WPA Guide to 1930s Iowa, introduction by Joseph Frazier Wall. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986. xi, 584 pp. Chronology, bibliography, illustrations, index. \$14.95 paper.

The Great Depression of the 1930s seems to be fading in America's collective memory. Yet there is much worth remembering and perhaps recycling. Among depression-decade developments that should have been "keepers" were the humane welfare programs and the widespread recommitment to community and reexamination of the quality of American life. With the unemployment rate sometimes bouncing over 20 percent, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) offered public welfare to the jobless under the less degrading rubric of "work relief." The Federal Writers Project (FWP), which lasted from 1935 to 1943, was one of hundreds of WPA workfare projects. FWP existed to sustain writers (preachers, teachers, office workers) through the economic emergency and to prevent atrophy of their skills.

Organized by state and guided by a strong administrative/editorial office in Washington, FWP's first priority was to research and publish a guide book for each of the forty-eight states. The project's central planners thought America needed a modified version of the Baedeker guides that instructed tourists about places and local customs in Europe and Asia. This sort of reference work was within the capacities of writers on relief. Nationally, upwards of six thousand self-proclaimed writers earned their welfare checks from FWP. The American Guide series (the state guide books) topped a list of achievements that featured over 275 books and more than a thousand smaller writ-

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