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THE NEW DEAL AND THE WEST: A REVIEW ESSAY

MICHAEL P. MALONE

THE NEW DEAL AND THE WEST. By Richard Lowitt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. *The West in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Martin Ridge. xx + 238 pp. Illus., bibliog., index. \$25.00.

THE PANORAMA OF THE twentieth century is the beckoning frontier of the rapidly evolving historiography of the American West. Only now are historians finally beginning to study this vital postfrontier era in a systematized fashion. Beyond dispute, the Depression–New Deal period of 1929–39 is a key facet—perhaps *the* key facet—of the western experience in modern times. The New Deal, with its massive proliferation of federal activities, federal monies, and federal regulations, marked an epochal redirection in the course of western history, beginning the end of the region’s “colonial” dependence upon the East and beginning its rise toward regional parity and economic and cultural self-sufficiency.

This new book by Richard Lowitt of Iowa State University, the first installment in Martin Ridge’s series with Indiana University Press on the twentieth century West, has been eagerly awaited. Lowitt certainly has the credentials to do the job. He combines an impressive knowledge of both the West and of twentieth-century America, and his three-volume biography of Nebraska’s great progressive Senator George Norris is justifiably esteemed.¹

Over the past thirty years, the New Deal has attracted the attention of some of this country’s best historians. Their interpretations range from those of a few rightist critics, to a vocal minority of New Left historians who excoriate the Roosevelt men for propping up a decadent capitalism, to liberal apologists like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Lowitt calmly avoids these often polemical discussions. Rather, he seems to follow the bent of the best New Deal scholars—for example, William E. Leuchtenburg, James T. Patterson, and Otis Graham—who are sympathetic with the New Deal’s cautiously liberal approach, but who are also objectively critical in their judgments.²

The author is quick to define his approach to this huge and complex subject. Correctly, at least to this reviewer, he defines the West broadly, to encompass all of the contiguous territory west of the eastern borders of the Dakota-Texas tier of states, Lowitt writes:

Equally easy was my decision to abandon a state-by-state approach for one that would examine New Deal agencies and programs as they affected the West. This was further refined to those agencies and programs that centered more or less exclusively on the West: namely programs and policies of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior. Other agencies and their activities would not be ignored, and the focus of the study would concentrate on the federal impact in the West during the New Deal years (p. xv).

Here, in essence, is the book's main thrust, and also a rendering of its converse strength and weakness. The book does not attempt a truly general overview of the New Deal in the West. Rather, it presents a selective analysis of certain key agencies and of certain subregions.

Lowitt begins with a brief introduction, noting the critically important role Westerners played in getting FDR nominated and elected in 1932. He then proceeds with a tour-like overview of depressed conditions out West, drawn from the accounts of relief administrator Harry Hopkins's handpicked observer, Lorena Hickok. In the following chapters, he sets forth his main interpretations. In the devastated and dust-blown Great Plains region, the New Deal's primary emphasis lay in the realm of Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace, and in efforts to deal with the wounded land and its disoriented population. In the Rockies and the arid lands to the west of them, the Interior Department and its headstrong chief Harold Ickes ruled supreme. Lowitt is most convincing in his depiction of the scheming bureaucrat Ickes as the New Deal lord of the West, and of the transformed Bureau of Reclamation as the engine of empire in this part of America. The construction of the great irrigation-hydroelectric projects like Boulder (Hoover) and Shasta dams revolutionized things in the arid West, initiating a symbiotic federal-financial-political nexus that continues to underlie the political economy of the region—as President Carter later learned to his sorrow.

The author proceeds to develop other themes of New Deal involvement out West. Through its silver purchase program, ramrodded by a handful of influential mountain states senators, the New Deal subsidized the depressed mining industry; and by regulating the interstate flow of "hot oil" from new fields, it attempted to save the glutted oil industry from complete collapse. John Collier's "Indian New Deal," offering tribes new hopes for self-government and management of their own resources, is viewed as a "mixed success."

Focusing upon two subregions of the Far West, Lowitt sees the New Deal's impact upon the coastal states as a study in variations. The Pacific Northwest emerged as the "promised land" of regional planning, with the great multipurpose dams at Bonneville and Grand Coulee and the Bonneville Power Administration that marketed their power serving as the engines of a new surge toward industrialization and prosperity. In the far-flung imperial state of California, on the contrary, the New Deal's impact "was considerably less than in any other part of the West" (p. 172), even despite the flow of federal dollars into the vast irrigation network of the Central Valley Project. In a brief chapter, Lowitt looks quickly at

political trends by focusing upon the westward travels of the Roosevelts. A concluding essay, "From Pioneering to Planning," restates the book's primary theme of the New Deal as the transition from a wasteful colonial era to the modern period of federal involvement and regional growth.

What this book attempts specifically to do, it does quite well. The analyses of federal agricultural, conservation, and reclamation policies are well informed, insightful, and convincing. In fact, it is refreshing and stimulating to avoid yet another review of "alphabet soup" agencies and to see instead the focus here upon a key underrated yet enduring agency like the Reclamation Bureau, which was transformed into the central force of federal power in the trans-Rocky Mountain West. However, the author's fundamental decision to follow selected themes rather than to attempt a truly comprehensive study seems to belie his title, "The New Deal and the West."

One must ask how thorough and accurate an assessment can be made of the New Deal's regional impact without an in-depth look at the key relief agencies that were its most conspicuous feature. In the West, like everywhere else, the FERA, WPA, CWA and other relief agencies were the most controversial aspect of the New Deal. They built everything from courthouses and airports to earthen dams and county roads. The same question might be raised about other main New Deal programs that are only touched upon here, like the National Industrial Recovery Act or the revolutionary new federal policies involving labor.

The author's use of source materials raises other questions, at least to this writer. Admittedly, using Lorena Hickok as a vantage upon the depressed West is effective; but myriads of other good sources are thereby left untapped. More importantly, the glimpses into western politics afforded by presidential travels and other occasional soundings barely scratch the surface of this vitally important and genuinely revolutionary aspect of the New Deal. This brings one to the book's major deficiency: its failure to draw upon much of the existing secondary literature on the New Deal in the West. In (wisely) eschewing a "state-by-state approach," one does not simply dispose of the essential fact that the New Deal transformed government and politics in all states. Indeed, as James T. Patterson demonstrated in his *The New Deal and the States*, it is not only possible but highly rewarding to sample the political situations in the states and to generalize from them. There are many book-length, article, and thesis studies of western states in the New Deal era and of western political leaders of the time; a perusal of them clearly reveals the tremendous impact that the New Deal had upon localities and local politics. Most of these studies, however, are not drawn upon in this volume, and the failure to utilize this important aspect of the literature on the subject must be counted a major shortcoming—whatever the specific focus of the book.³

Thus, *The New Deal and the West* is a mixed achievement. As a first foray into a very large and complex subject, examining and explaining the new roles of key agencies in the West, it is successful and impressive. In slighting other important facets of the New Deal, and in ignoring the writings of a number of scholars who have already explored the New Deal in the western states, however, it leaves

much of the essential fleshing out of the subject, even in a general sense, yet to be done. The book is, in essence, a beginning, and an important and rewarding one at that.

NOTES

1. Richard Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Making of a Progressive, 1861-1912* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963); Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Persistence of a Progressive, 1913-1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); and Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Triumph of a Progressive, 1933-1944* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

2. See Jerold S. Auerbach, "New Deal, Old Deal, or Raw Deal: Some Thoughts on New Left Historiography," *Journal of Southern History* 35 (February 1969): 19-30; Robert E. Burke and Richard Lowitt, *The New Era and the New Deal, 1920-1940*, Goldentree Bibliographies in American History (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1981); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957-60); William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Otis L. Graham, Jr., *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

3. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States*. Two starting points in looking over the literature on the New Deal in the western localities are *Pacific Historical Review* 38 (August 1969), and John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *The New Deal*, vol. 2: *The State and Local Levels*, 2 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), which has extended essays on Oklahoma, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oregon.