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Review of *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* Edited by Virgil W. Dean

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John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History. Edited by Virgil W. Dean. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. xii + 408 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$29.95.

For nearly half of its existence as a political entity, it would seem that Kansas was assigned a larger-than-life role on the national stage and—arguably—was on the right side of history, or at least aspired to be on the side of a common humanity; since then, especially from the 1920s and New Deal eras to the present, one might contend the state has been lodged within a backwater of time, in need of a new “crop of leaders” capable of dealing with modern exigencies. But according to this study’s introductory essay, “this commodity seems in short supply at present. . . .” Apparently this examination of the lives of twenty-six Kansans was suggested, in part, by a desire to inspire new leaders as of old, although Senator Sam Brownback and Fred Woodward of the University Press of Kansas were the prime movers and may possibly not be in full accord with the judgment regarding the state’s current inferior leaders.

Virgil Dean, a native Kansas historian long associated with the state’s historical society, is to be commended for putting this impressive “collection of original biographical essays” together. Under his careful direction, above all because of his bold and innovative choices of subjects, the reader is exposed to a variety of interesting and important Kansans stretching from John Brown to Bob Dole. As an impertinent wag might say, we thus travel from a campaign against slavery to a war against sexual impotence, suggesting the question, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”

Conceding the limitations of biography, the study nonetheless makes an important contribution to understanding the state’s history, adding, in fact, a dimension that would otherwise escape our attention, one deriving from the skillful manner in which Dean has selected and then interwoven a

coherent tapestry from divergent sources. The biographers—all university professors, save one—include among their number just about everyone of any consequence currently writing on the subject of Kansas history. Although somewhat uneven, the essays are generally quite readable, consistently interesting, and certainly instructive.

Pardon my special interest, but I can think of half-a-dozen Kansas Populists whose biographies are more deserving of inclusion than that of Mary Elizabeth Lease, unless of course one aimed to emphasize the negative anti-Populist image, which may well have been the case because, despite all that has been written since 1950s, the old image dies hard. For sure, Lease could not have asked for a more positive spin on her short but spectacular association with the Kansas People’s party than that impressively fashioned by Rebecca Edwards. In my view, Edwards’s essay is among the very best of the lot: we all look forward to the publication of her larger study of the Kansas stemwinder.

Just as impressive are the essays by H. Roger Grant, Sally M. Miller, M. H. Hoeflich, and Milton S. Katz, who treated the lives of Frederick Harvey, Kate Richards O’Hare, Esther Brown, and Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius respectively. The last of these certainly brings back memories, since this reviewer is old enough to remember Haldeman-Julius patronizing the Pittsburg, Kansas, restaurant where he worked as a cleanup boy back in the early 1950s. A number of others are just as impressive. Still others are afflicted with shortcomings that will not be detailed here. The bottom line: this is a welcome and admirable study of Kansas’s colorful and instructive history fashioned by the best writers available on the subject.

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