

Review of the book *This happened in America: Harold Rugg and the censure of social studies* by R. W. Evans

By: [Wayne Journell](#)

Journell, W. (2009). [Review of the book *This happened in America: Harold Rugg and the censure of social studies* by R. W. Evans]. *The History Teacher*, 42, 371-373.

*****© Society for History Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Society for History Education, Inc. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Made available courtesy of Society for History Education, Inc.:
<http://www.thehistoryteacher.org/>

Abstract:

The primary emotion that I felt after reading Ronald Evans' biography of progressive era luminary Harold Rugg was that of pleasant surprise, I was familiar with Evans' work, and I knew that *This Happened in America* won the 2008 Exemplary Research Award from the National Council for the Social Studies, so I expected the book to be thoroughly researched and well-written, which it certainly was. However, I began the book somewhat skeptical about how relevant the story of a rather obscure educator, at least outside of the social studies, would be for a contemporary social studies audience. Yet the way in which Evans tells the story, particularly regarding the ideological attacks Rugg faced during the 1940s, provides a poignant commentary on both the importance of social studies education and the public contention against progressive social studies curricula that questions the status quo.

Keywords: book review | social studies | public education | pedagogy

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

prostitutes, to the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, a patriotic organization of black sharecroppers in Arkansas. Chapters on Selective Service and conscientious objection establish the role that ordinary citizens played in staffing draft boards and persuading fellow Americans not to resist. A chapter on women discusses the wartime cooperation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the latter of which voted in February 1918 to root out pacifism and disloyalty among its members. And chapters on "responsible speech" and enemy aliens deal with the limits imposed on free expression and the repression of German culture.

Some of these chapters would be excellent for teaching an undergraduate survey, such as those on Selective Service and conscientious objection, which provide a clear and concrete narrative and connect it to a larger framework. Because of the interesting cultural transformation it describes—from civic voluntarism to coercive voluntarism—the book could be used alongside the interpretations of such authors as Robert Wiebe, Michael McGerr, and David Montgomery in a course on the 1870 to 1920 period. Community college and high school teachers can draw from countless anecdotes that would be amusing if they were not so disturbing. For example, in the New York City slacker raids, a trucker who offered to transport a crowd of detainees was unable to produce his draft card and ended up being detained himself. The book should also be required reading for graduate students in courses dealing with the First World War or changing definitions of citizenship.

Uncle Sam Wants You has considerable strengths in addition to those already mentioned. Capozzola quantifies each subject he discusses, giving a basic measure of significance. For instance, readers learn that between 20,000 and 25,000 people participated in the New York City slacker raids of September 1918, and that 60,187 people were detained. The text is also full of valuable insights. In the chapter on vigilance committees, Capozzola observes that it was often such societies of respectable citizens, and not poor or working-class Americans, who were responsible for the vigilante violence that was later pinned on the mob or radical organizations. The author also embraces complexity to show how obligation was contested. In the chapter on women, he deals not only with the loyalty of mainline organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, but also the direct challenge to the White House presented by Alice Paul's protests for woman suffrage.

Capozzola is determined to connect each of his anecdotes to his larger concept of obligation, but at times, the reasoning can seem a little abstruse. He uses more familiar terms such as the "progressive era" and the "modern state" in places, but they could have been further integrated into the story, especially since some of his principal characters, such as Woodrow Wilson and Newton Baker, were prominent progressives. Still, readers are unlikely to find a fresher, more substantial exploration of the repressive atmosphere of World War I anytime soon.

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Jacob Kramer

This Happened in America: Harold Rugg and the Censure of Social Studies, by Ronald W. Evans. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007. 306 pages. \$39.99, paper.

The primary emotion that I felt after reading Ronald Evans' biography of progressive era luminary Harold Rugg was that of pleasant surprise. I was familiar with Evans' work,

and I knew that *This Happened in America* won the 2008 Exemplary Research Award from the National Council for the Social Studies, so I expected the book to be thoroughly researched and well-written, which it certainly was. However, I began the book somewhat skeptical about how relevant the story of a rather obscure educator, at least outside of the social studies, would be for a contemporary social studies audience. Yet the way in which Evans tells the story, particularly regarding the ideological attacks Rugg faced during the 1940s, provides a poignant commentary on both the importance of social studies education and the public contention against progressive social studies curricula that questions the status quo.

Rugg's story starts with his New England upbringing, which Evans references throughout the book as the source of Rugg's determination and work ethic. As a young man, Rugg received an undergraduate education, not in history or social studies, but in civil engineering. This experience led him to his first teaching position where Rugg became enamored with questions related to education and how students learn. Rugg subsequently enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Illinois where he earned a Ph.D. in education, although he still had not yet focused on social studies.

Where the story becomes relevant for social studies educators is when Rugg accepted a position at Teachers College at Columbia University following World War I. It is here that Rugg rubbed shoulders with other giants of progressive education, such as John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, and George Counts. The position also allowed Rugg to expand on his vision for education, which found new aim on social issues through a problem-centered method of teaching and learning. Rugg's first major venture into this arena came in the form of social science pamphlets that focused on the 7th- through 9th-grade curriculum with a thematic approach to teaching social studies that portrayed history as a method of questioning contemporary social issues rather than as merely a chronology of events.

The success of the pamphlets led to a series of textbooks in which Rugg's goal was to make social studies relevant and interesting to students' lives. It was clear, however, that Rugg designed these textbooks to coincide with a social reconstructivist agenda, a position articulated by many at Teachers College and reinforced by the social liberalism created by the New Deal of the 1930s. Yet, as the decade ended and the United States soon became engulfed in another world war, criticism began to mount against the progressive agenda and, thus, Rugg's textbooks. Amid the nationalistic fervor of World War II, conservatives admonished Rugg as a socialist, and his books, of which over one million had been sold since 1929, were systematically banned from school districts across the United States. Although Rugg continued to write and publish until his death in 1960, his career never fully recovered.

Sadly, it is Rugg's declining influence at the hands of these traditionalists that makes this story salient for modern social studies educators. Inevitably, when one asks pre-service teachers, particularly those in social studies education, why they are becoming teachers, they respond by saying that they want to have a part in changing society for the better. Regardless of the moniker used—progressive, participatory, social justice, issue-centered—what ultimately drives individuals to education is the opportunity to improve society one student at a time by making content relevant and promoting positive civic practices.

However, if the Rugg story tells us anything, it is that public schooling operates within traditional power structures and, too often, the authorities are unwilling to support anything that deviates from the status quo. This is particularly true during times of national conflict or strife. After reading about Rugg's experiences, one must question whether such a conservative, nationalistic movement is once again rising in the United States. For Rugg, the source of contention was the totalitarianism of World War II; today's social studies

educators face a society not yet a decade removed from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a spiraling global economy, and multiple military conflicts around the world. This is not to say that today's progressive social studies educators should abandon their principles, but as Evans shows, an examination of not-so-distant history suggests that teaching for social justice in the new millennium may require a willingness to fight.

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Wayne Journell

The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Phillip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America, by John Fea. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 280 pages. \$39.95, cloth.

The colonial and revolutionary eras in America experienced both a religious and an intellectual awakening. Early Americans wanted to be both pious and enlightened. Professor John Fea of Messiah College has captured a vivid picture of such an individual, his subject, Philip Vickers Fithian (1747-1776). Fithian appears often in the literature and histories of the late eighteenth century, but Fea's work is the first comprehensive biography of this interesting, albeit short, life. Within the pages of his account, Fea produces a cultural and intellectual biography; therefore, readers receive a glimpse into the mind of one of the period's well-known diarists and the society that shaped him. As Fea states, his purpose in writing serves "to use Philip's story to explain the impact of the Enlightenment in the British American colonies" (p. 4). Fithian serves as a historical model of an enlightened Christian and republican. He also writes this work with his students in mind, because during his tenure as a professor, he has "learned that biography can be used to help students locate the Enlightenment historically and suggest to them that ideas about how to make a better self always rise in a historical context" (p. 5). The author writes Fithian's life in tight chronological detail, beginning with his family (both parents died during his twenties); his religious conversion; call to ministry; studies at Princeton with John Witherspoon; and his difficult courtship with Betsy Beatty, who initially turns him down, but marries him five years later. The most famous episode of his life is the year he served as a tutor at the plantation of Robert Carter in Virginia, where he kept a thorough journal of his experiences. He also traveled as circuit-riding preacher throughout Pennsylvania and Virginia. The diary closes with the entry of September 22, 1776, while Fithian was serving as a chaplain in the militia. He died on October 8, 1776 of dysentery. Philip and Betsy did not have children.

Fithian's biography illustrates four interrelated themes at the heart of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century America: self improvement, reason as a necessary check to the individual passions, the directing of one's passions away from parochial concerns to a universal love of humanity, and balancing Enlightenment ideals with a deep Christian faith. These four serve as the framework for the remainder of the work.

Through the diaries of Fithian, readers get a deeply intimate look into the mind of a conflicted individual who wanted to aspire to perfection, remain loyal to his Calvinist faith, and a yet live as child of the Enlightenment and a staunch proponent of republicanism. Scholars, students, and readers of more secular views may read into this account that Fithian was a secularist at heart, but evangelical Calvinists of Fithian's generation viewed their faith as superior to worldly ideas, and there is no evidence that Fithian ever doubted the superiority of the Christian worldview. As Fea astutely notes, "Philip's call to