

Fighting Bob La Follette: the Righteous Reformer

John D. Buenker

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The Making of Milwaukee, by John Gurda. Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999. ix, 458 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer John D. Buenker is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. His latest book is *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 4, *The Progressive Era, 1893-1915* (1998).

Inspired by Milwaukee's sesquicentennial in 1996, historian/columnist/photographer/lecturer John Gurda has produced the most ambitious of his baker's dozen of books dealing with various aspects of life in his beloved hometown. Cogently written, brimming with *bon-mots* and trenchant one-liners, and enhanced with hundreds of illustrations woven into its lively text, *The Making of Milwaukee* consists of nine chronologically organized chapters, which cumulatively trace the evolution of the Cream City from "its obscure beginnings as an Indian settlement" to "its gradual (but never complete) immersion in national and global affairs" after 1967. Intervening chapters focus on successive time spans of approximately twenty years, demarcated by defining economic, demographic, or political developments. Thematic continuity is provided by Gurda's ongoing efforts to "uncover Milwaukee's civic bedrock—the shifting foundation on which individuals have built their lives and the community has constructed its identity" and by his insistence that "the operative question throughout the book is 'Why?'"

Although Gurda insists that "choice and circumstance have combined to produce a community that is unique in all the world," and although the book will appeal primarily to those with some emotional tie to or intellectual interest in Milwaukee's history, he also clearly succeeds in his stated ancillary purpose of adding "a useful historical dimension to the ongoing conversation about . . . American cities in general." Anyone interested in that discourse, or in learning more about the development of the upper Midwest through the history of one of its most colorful cities, will find this a highly informative and entertaining read.

Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer, by Nancy C. Unger. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xiii, 393 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer John D. Buenker is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. He has written several books and articles about the Progressive Era, most recently *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 4, *The Progressive Era, 1893-1915*.

When Robert M. La Follette Sr. died in 1925, just months after his unsuccessful third-party campaign for the presidency, fellow progressive Republican Senator William Borah observed that "it's hard to say the

right thing about Bob La Follette. You know, he lived about 150 years." Ever since then, numerous interpreters have labored to say "the right thing" about Wisconsin's most famous and controversial public figure, whose actual life lasted only 70 years, but whose career as congressman, governor, and senator reached from Reconstruction to the Jazz Age. During that epoch, he lost but one election in his native state, made his name and that of Wisconsin nearly synonymous with "progressivism," and led a feisty band of midwestern and western "insurgents" and "irreconcilables" who were constant and effective thorns in the side of the political and economic establishment—not to mention every president from Theodore Roosevelt to Calvin Coolidge. In recent years, various polls of scholars and politicians have rated him, among other things, as the most important Wisconsinite and the greatest governor of the twentieth century, and the fourth most significant U.S. senator of all time. Nevertheless, three generations of scholarly efforts to measure the man and his impact have produced more controversy and contradiction than consensus. Nancy Unger's insightful biography of "Fighting Bob" is hardly likely to be the last word on the subject, but she comes closer to saying "the right thing" about this charismatic and enigmatic midwesterner than have any of her predecessors, both by penetrating to the core of his identity and by assessing his proper historical reputation.

The key to understanding La Follette's unique blend of strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, the author argues persuasively, lies in the recognition that he "always acted within the confines of his life as shaped by the emotional casualties of his childhood." What appear on the surface to be political flip-flops and glaring contradictions "are actually quite consistent in view of La Follette's emotional needs." A lifelong "prisoner of his childhood," he fought "ceaselessly to combat competing feelings of emptiness and grandiosity." That struggle manifested itself, above all, in his debilitating need to "see himself, and himself alone, as the infallible judge of right and wrong and all opponents as insincere at best, corrupt at worst." Thus driven, La Follette was virtually incapable of compromise or delegation of authority, frequently undermined laudable goals by choosing disastrous means, and repeatedly pushed himself to the brink of physical, emotional, and financial ruin in pursuit of "righteous" causes. That same compulsion took a tremendous emotional toll on his family, whose primary functions were to fill his enormous emotional void and to sacrifice themselves, as he did, on the altar of "righteousness" (2-5).

Even presenting La Follette "warts and all," however, does not deter Unger from asserting boldly that modern-day historians have

generally underestimated or misinterpreted his historical significance, portraying him, at best, as a glorious failure to be admired for his "undaunted courage, unlimited perseverance, and enormous dedication" (3). In her view, he deserves to be celebrated as a "constructive statesman who strove for a more democratic social order," who was instrumental in most of the successful reform efforts of his own time, who prefigured many of the achievements of the New Deal and its putative successors, and whose "battle to more equitably redistribute the nation's power and wealth continues to be waged," often by people who acknowledge La Follette as one of their chief role models (3, 308-9).

Unger's *La Follette* is clearly a biography worthy of its subject. In Wisconsin, and lots of other places as well, there could be no higher praise.

The Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, by George McJimsey. American Presidency Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. xvi, 355 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Michael J. Anderson is associate professor of history and chair of the department of history and political science at Clarke College. His research has focused on twentieth-century politics.

George McJimsey has taken on a difficult task: a one-volume study of the 12-year presidency of FDR. His effort, coming in at just 300 pages, succeeds in many respects. Although not everyone will agree with all of his arguments, McJimsey brings some interesting and challenging insights to bear in the long debate about Roosevelt and his legacy.

One of the engaging features of this work is that it has a clear thesis. McJimsey argues that the Roosevelt administration needs to be seen in the context of its time, which was characterized, according to the author, by the emergence of "pluralism," "an intellectual outlook . . . that informed approaches to organization and problem solving" (xii). McJimsey contends that pluralism, which had emerged in the twenties, rejected a fixed, hierarchical search for final solutions to social problems in favor of "a continuous process of decision and action, action and decision" (8).

McJimsey's study is organized topically, covering the New Deal, prewar foreign policy, and wartime policy. After a chapter on the first hundred days, prewar domestic policy is covered in chapters devoted to economic recovery, social recovery, and "resources for recovery," as well as chapters discussing FDR's political base, Eleanor Roosevelt and women, and the limits of the New Deal. These chapters, in many ways, constitute both the most challenging, and most interesting, part

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