

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

The thesis is provocative as is the book; its many strengths result in profitable and enjoyable reading. Numerous chapters such as the ones on the genesis of the Berkeley riots, the structure of the foreign policy establishment, and the problems of voter registration in the South, resemble good feature articles which bring a topic to life by a skillful blending of personalities and events. The author displays acute insight into events that he personally reported. For instance, he aptly diagnoses the fatal disease of the New Left and Counter Culture. The "Movement's" ambivalence whether to accept and change society or renounce and withdraw from it led to dissolution. Moreover, the media is properly identified as an active and very important participant of the era subject to corruptive influences from within and without the networks.

A good book is not without its flaws, and this one is no exception. It lacks clear organization both in the body and its notes on sources. Hodgson's historical analysis fails to recognize much in United States history before World War II. To dramatize the republic's fate, the work overemphasizes the inevitability of its failure.

America In Our Time contains too many flaws to qualify as the authoritative statement on a troubled age. Nonetheless it invites thoughtful reading.

Patrick J. Wilkinson
Murray State University
Murray, KY

Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920, by Bradley Robert Rice. Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1977. pp. xix, 160. Charts, appendix, bibliography, index. \$10.95.

Iowans will find much of interest in Bradley Robert Rice's *Progressive Cities*, specifically an entire chapter on municipal charter reform in Des Moines at the turn of the century. At that time Hawkeye political reformers, led by Albert Baird Cummins, were in the fore of what became known as the Progressive

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Movement, and Des Moines lent its name to a particular urban reform that substituted a new, business-styled city commission for the mayor-council form of municipal government. When in 1907 Des Moines became the first northern city to adopt the commission, it added additional democratic devices for which it claimed (inappropriately) sole origination. These procedures—initiative, referendum, and recall—added special appeal to the reform movement among northern constituencies and allowed local boosters to export the city commission plan to other cities as the “Des Moines Plan.” Iowa’s capital city, therefore, played an important role in diffusing a particular Progressive reform, and that role is ably examined and lucidly narrated in chapter three of this book.

Galveston, Texas instituted the first city commission in 1901 in an effort by business leaders to efficiently direct recovery efforts after the devastating hurricane the previous year. In a few years it spread to an impressive number of Texas cities, and it moved north in 1907. Despite the many reform devices that became attached to commission charters, all city commissions contained four essentials: authority and responsibility were centralized; legislative and administrative responsibility were vested in the same small group of men; commissioners were elected at large, rather than by wards; and each commissioner headed a single department. Initiative, recall, referendum, short ballot, and non-partisan elections became closely associated with commission charters, but these electoral reforms did not alter the basic government structure.

Rice’s thesis is that “the major long-term importance of the commission movement was a transition to the council-manager plan.” (xvi) He also argues persuasively that “business elites almost invariably favored and laboring classes usually opposed the adoption of the commission. . . .” In Des Moines, for instance, the June 20, 1907 charter election resulted in sixty-nine percent support for the commission on the predominantly white collar west side of the Des Moines River and sixty-four percent opposition in the largely blue collar east side. Previous articles by Samuel P. Hays and James Weinstein emphasized this business leadership and support of the commission movement, but Rice adds a mass of supporting evidence that they did not pro-

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vide and also carefully notes that business was sometimes divided, and labor was occasionally involved in reform planning.

Commission charters eventually died as alternatives to mayor-council governments because of basic structural weaknesses. The commission was replaced by the city manager as the golden fleece of urban structural reformers largely because it failed to provide executive leadership, did not insure qualified managers in the executive positions, and in many cases came again under the control of old-fashioned political bosses, often dressed in new-fangled Progressive clothing. This is an excellent study of the creation, diffusion, institutionalization, and demise of a progressive idea that should be of special interest to urban historians and political scientists. It should also be read by all Iowans interested in learning more about a period of Hawkeye history when their state was in the advance guard of national political reform.

David Crosson
Allen County-Ft. Wayne
Historical Society
Ft. Wayne, IN

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