

might ask why McConnell chose to profile these five car makers over thousands of others. One must assume that they typified the general trends he discussed.

John L. Lewis: Hard Labor and Wild Justice, by Ron E. Roberts. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1994. viii, 223 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$23.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PETER RACHLEFF, MACALESTER COLLEGE

Few labor leaders have been accorded space in America's public pantheon of heroes. John L. Lewis is probably the best known of the lot—and the most controversial. Ron Roberts has done a fine job of presenting Lewis's life within its changing historical context, and Kendall/Hunt has produced a handsome book, richly illustrated with photographs and cartoons that add to the reader's comprehension of Lewis.

Lewis, who was born in Lucas, Iowa, led the United Mine Workers union for four decades and masterminded the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid-1930s. At that time, he got more press than President Roosevelt himself. Lewis was a very complex figure, able to cooperate with Republicans (he endorsed Wilkie in 1940) and communists (he hired hundreds of them as organizers in the 1930s). He provided militant leadership for his rank-and-file membership, yet often used the union as a personal fiefdom in which he found places for his family and friends.

There have been several earlier Lewis biographies—Saul Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (1949); Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (1977); and Robert Zieger, *John L. Lewis, Labor Leader* (1988)—but this one comes closest to capturing Lewis's complexity. Professor Roberts benefits from personal insight unavailable to Lewis's previous biographers. Like Lewis, he hails from Lucas, part of the third generation in his family to be born there. Roberts's understanding of Lucas and the cultures (especially Welsh) that shaped the values and attitudes of coal miners gives him a major clue to Lewis's character. Roberts has also taken advantage of his familial and community ties to interview people who knew Lewis and could offer insights into his roots.

John L. Lewis: Hard Labor and Wild Justice opens in the early nineteenth century with the radical transformation of the Welsh countryside by coal mining and modern industry. Lewis's family would leave this place to come to the United States, eventually settling in Lucas, Iowa, which was being similarly jolted by the forces of modern industry. There, in the late 1870s, miners helped plant a seed of trade unionism, which grew from the Knights of Labor to the United Mine

Workers of America (UMW) in the 1890s. They also transplanted and nurtured a culture that valued family commitments, hard work, temperance, and a certain degree of stubbornness.

Like most of his male relatives and neighbors, Lewis went into the mines at age 14 as a "trapper boy," working as a shot firer, mule driver, and miner before he was old enough to vote. By that time, he had already joined the Masons, acted in community theater, helped build a gazebo in the town square, and managed a local baseball team. By early adulthood, he was known as a man who could quote Shakespeare *and* lead a strike. At 27, he was elected president of UMW Local 799 in Lucas.

Lewis would never go back to work in the mines. He soon left Iowa for Illinois, where he continued to develop as a working-class intellectual and a union leader. Over the next few years, he lobbied for safety legislation, organized for the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and became statistician for the national UMW. On the eve of World War I, John White, the president of the UMW and a Lucas native as well, appointed Lewis executive vice-president of the union. In 1920 Lewis was elected president, a post he would hold until 1959.

Lewis's years of greatest visibility and controversy were the 1930s and 1940s, when he launched the CIO over the objections of his old allies in the AFL, and when he broke with the mainstream of even the CIO to challenge Roosevelt and the labor movement's no-strike pledge during World War II. Throughout his career, Lewis was respected and reviled, praised and caricatured. Neither his friends nor his enemies ever made light of him.

Ron Roberts's book provides us with a chance to gain new insight into this prominent labor leader. It also gives students of Iowa history an additional perspective on the significance of coal mining to the state's economic and labor development, a topic recently raised in Shelton Stromquist's *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor* (1994). *John L. Lewis: Hard Labor and Wild Justice* is a valuable contribution to our deepening understanding of this subject.

Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990, by Douglas Wixson. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xvi, 678 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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In the late 1960s Jack Conroy began reaping awards after a long fallow period. Gwendolyn Brooks, presenting the Literary Times Prize, cited "his aid and encouragement to young writers and his overall contribu-

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