

Book Reviews

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Wallace M. Short: Iowa Rebel, by William H. Cumberland. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983. ix, 177 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paper.

William H. Cumberland's biography of Wallace M. Short is a welcome contribution to the study of twentieth-century Iowa politics and midwestern progressivism. While Short is not well known today, fifty years ago he was a prominent figure in farmer and labor circles. He first acquired notoriety as a Congregationalist minister opposed to prohibition prior to World War I. As a result of that position, he ultimately lost his Sioux City pulpit and was expelled from two ministerial associations. He may have become more controversial in 1919, when as mayor of Sioux City, he extended a welcome to the radical Industrial Workers of the World. All of his adult life, he was a strong supporter of organized labor and he directed much of his attention after his three mayoralty terms toward building a farmer-labor political coalition. He edited a weekly labor paper, the *Unionist and Public Forum*, for more than twenty years, and emerged as the key figure in Iowa's Farmer-Labor party during the Depression. Close to Milo Reno, Short supported the Farm Holiday and criticized the New Deal farm program. Later, however, during World War II, he became a strong backer of FDR and Henry Wallace. Then, in the postwar era, he opposed American foreign policy and endorsed Wallace's third-party candidacy in 1948.

Cumberland's fair-minded account covers the long public career of this "Iowa rebel," and in so doing, illuminates other topics as well. One of the most interesting sections of the book concerns Short's involvement with third-party efforts in the 1930s. Early in the decade, he had served one term as a Republican legislator and later he failed to obtain the 1934 Republican gubernatorial nomination. Then he opted for the new Farmer-Labor party and was its candidate for governor three times. The most controversial episode of his career (at least as far as his reputation as a progressive is concerned) was his flirtation with Huey Long and Father Coughlin, which caused

him to back William Lemke's 1936 presidential bid on the Union ticket. Many have portrayed the Lemke campaign as a seedy, illiberal, and perhaps semi-fascist effort. Cumberland is critical of this particular phase of Short's career, but helps us understand that it grew (at least in part) from his desire to build a progressive alternative to the New Deal.

In some respects, Short was more conservative than Roosevelt and feared big government. He was, however, a strong proponent of civil liberties. In the 1920s, he had blasted the Ku Klux Klan (a step which Milo Reno was unwilling to take at the time) and he was never sympathetic to fascism. Cumberland observes at one point: "Most editors saw him as a progressive, the kind of man, said the *Kansas City Herald*, as 'George Norris, Bob La Follette, and other progressives, who have proved true to the workers at all times.'" Later, Short backed the CIO and praised its efforts in regard to race.

The author has done a good job in ferreting out details of Short's career and of other topics, particularly Iowa's ill-fated Farmer-Labor party. My most significant reservation with this work is its limited scope. While Cumberland has researched in the appropriate manuscript and newspaper sources and sought information about figures such as former labor editor Roland White and farm leader Fred Stover, his conception of the study may have been overly narrow. In some cases, perhaps most, he could have met this criticism simply by making an effort to fit Short into a broader political and historiographical context. For example, how does he compare with Iowa's other prominent Social Gospel figure, George Herron? How does his experience as mayor of Sioux City compare with that of other reform mayors? At one point, Cumberland compares his subject with William Lemke, but other midwestern political figures, including Minnesota's Elmer Benson, might make appropriate comparisons as well. Short had a fascinating career, and his biographer conceivably could have used it as a means of testing or qualifying the broad, interpretative generalizations of other historians of midwestern politics.

Yet Cumberland has provided us with a balanced treatment of a fighter for family farmers, unionists, and civil liberties which succeeds in restoring Wallace Short as a significant figure in recent Iowa history. That is an effort worth emulating. Perhaps some other twentieth-century Iowans of note (in addition to the two Henry Wallaces) will soon attract their scholarly biographers as well.

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