

Reading the Past

ONE OF THE MOST ENJOYABLE and satisfying ways to read history is through biographies. In biographies we get to know a person intimately: we read their mail, learn their likes and dislikes, discover their strengths and weaknesses, share their ideas, revel in their accomplishments, and empathize with their failures. Biography is one historical genre where straightforward storytelling is still the norm. And stories that biographies tell, unlike many historical tales, have clearly defined beginnings and endings. Furthermore, the best biographies reveal as much about the subject's "times" as they do about his or her life.

All of these strengths characterize the best biography of an Iowan to come out in recent years, John C. Culver and John Hyde's *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace*. It helps that Culver and Hyde chose as their subject one of the most fascinating and significant figures in Iowa history. And unlike

those of many "famous Iowans," Wallace's ties to Iowa were deep and lasting, so his biography tells readers a lot about Iowa history as well as the history of the nation.

The authors are thorough in dealing with the various aspects of Wallace's remarkably wide-ranging career. They account for his years as a farm editor, when he and his family had an immense impact on Iowa farmers. They also make a fascinating story out of his role in the development and marketing of hybrid seed corn, which transformed Iowa agriculture in the 20th century. In both roles,

Wallace was, the authors

argue, "the prophet and evangelist, the teacher and preacher of agricultural scientific advancement." The authors also uncover Wallace's vast intellectual curiosity, which led to religious experimentation that many Americans found bizarre. Other than that, however, there is little in this biography about his private, family life, the one significant gap in the authors' coverage.

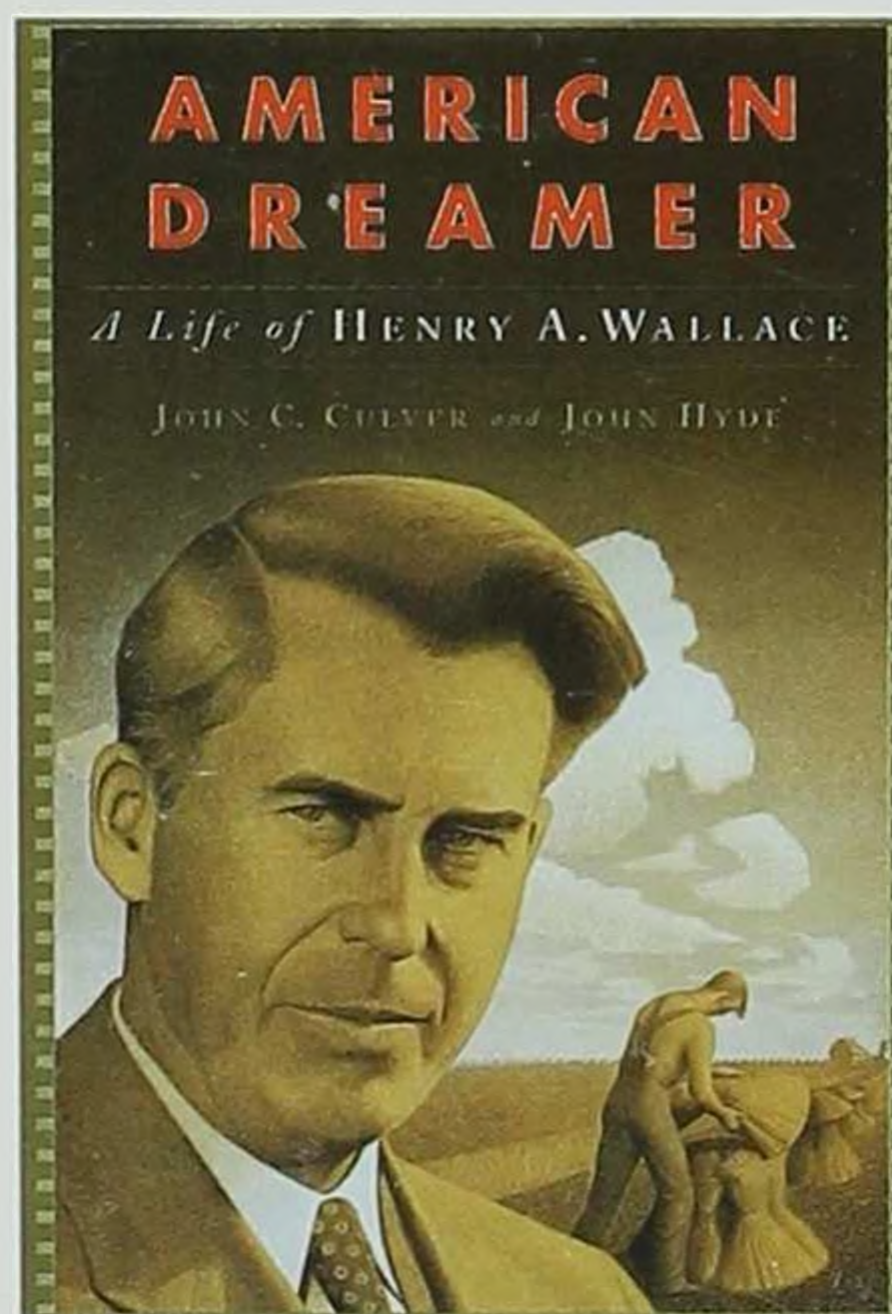
Although the authors offer a comprehensive account of Wallace's life, it's clearly his political life

that they find most interesting. There, the narrative really comes to life. This should not be surprising given the authors' backgrounds—Culver as a former U.S. representative and senator from Iowa; Hyde as a reporter in the *Des Moines Register's* Washington bureau. And there are great stories to tell here: Wallace's leading role—as Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Commerce, and Vice-President—in the development of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies; his replacement on the ticket in 1944 by Harry Truman; his tragic run for the presidency in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket.

Wallace, most readers will know before they begin this book, was no typical politician. Culver and Hyde confirm that perception. In their account, Wallace was first and foremost a man of ideas, an "American dreamer." Wallace's opponents did not hesitate to use that characterization against him. For Culver and Hyde, however, it is a compliment. They insist that he was a dreamer in the best of a long tradition of American dreamers stretching back to Thomas Jefferson. They repeatedly defend Wallace against charges of political naiveté. Over and over they show instances when he was an effective bureaucratic infighter when necessary, but he was unwilling to obfuscate or be duplicitous. At times when he appeared naive, such as during the 1944 Democratic Convention that denied him the vice-presidency, he knew the potential consequences of his actions and chose to pursue them anyway. The authors' repeated efforts to make this point give their biography an ironic twist: in a book dedicated to the proposition that their subject was a man of ideas, an American dreamer in the best sense of the word, one dedicated to bringing his dreams to life, their account of his political life devotes more space to bureaucratic infighting than to ideology.

Whatever his dream, whatever the battles he engages in to pursue that dream, Wallace always appears in this book as a heroic figure, at times nearly alone in his heroism, and all his enemies are backroom wheelers and dealers with impure motives. Some readers may wish for a more subtle treatment, but many others will finish this book convinced that this heroic Iowan whose remarkable life was unfairly tarnished at the end of his career deserves the resuscitation that John Culver and John Hyde's impressive biography performs so admirably.

—by Marvin Bergman,
editor, *Annals of Iowa*



American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace, by John C. Culver and John Hyde. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000. xi, 608 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.