

Hand-of-Death Rule

THIS WAS NORMALCY. *An Account of Party Politics During Twelve Republican Years, 1920-1932.* By Karl Schriftgiesser. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1948. 325 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by DUNCAN AIKMAN

KARL SCHRIFTGIESSER is so lively a contemporary journalist that a few years ago he put oomph into the obituary pages of an outstandingly serious New York newspaper. In this book he performs a similar feat. Working with the mortuary, not to say charnel-house materials, of the Harding-through-Hoover dance of death in the Republic's economics and policies, he produces at once a factually packed Ph.D.'s "obit" of the times he chronicles, and a slashing commentary on their sins and stupidities.

All that is dead in the ideas of the leaders and policymakers of 1920-1932, including many of the still ambulant ideological and personal hatreds of Mr. Herbert Clark Hoover, lives again in these pages.

The hand of death might, indeed, have been a fitting symbol of those last dozen years of reactionary GOP rule in the America which otherwise was, and still is, promises. The 1920-1932 Presidents, the big-shot politicians and business leaders around them, were trying to prolong the life of the nineteenth century's values and methods—the old jolly-roger free enterprise economic system untrammelled—into an era already crashing with present and impending changes: production-method, as well as merely social and mental climate changes.

It seemed to the Harding-through-Hoover men as if all conceivable sacrifices were worth making to keep the nineteenth century's death-hand fixed on the levers of American, not to say of world, progress. If a little crookedness to the benefit of big oil and other big private business interests could keep the dead hand at the controls a little longer, President Harding's pet cabinet ministers, Fall and Daugherty, were on the job happy to arrange. If "the good old days" could only be preserved for the American republic, "Old Stupid"—as this reviewer can testify Harding was known to the correspondents' staff at Marion, Ohio, in 1920—would be glad to oblige by keeping the United States out of the League of Nations.

Again, if simply running away from thought was a good way to preserve the national economy as grandfather loved it, the leaders of "normalcy" could retreat from ideas and insight into their world, into the inanities of



—From "The American Past."

"Well, farmers never have made money," said Coolidge as farm prices slumped and industry boomed in the 1920's.

President Coolidge's platitudes. And at the same time build up the granite mouse from the Green Mountains as wise-saw maker at large to 130,000,000 people about to be shaken with changes.

By the time President Hoover inherited the mess which the "normalcists" had made with their negations of the facts of life, their credos had hardened for him into a kind of crabbed theology. For change, on Wall Street's "big bust" day, October 24, 1929, shook President Hoover too.

But the man was so wrapped in his passions for a disappearing world that he never knew what shook, or touched, him. And does not today—with his sour resentment against "wets," "radicals," "collectivists," and worse, leftists who misunderstood and "abused" him. Mr. Schriftgiesser gives "the Great Engineer" a grimmer and more pointed dismissal by saying that, in the depression, he "believed that society should take care of its own, its old, its sick, its jobless, and its homeless. But . . . Herbert Hoover never confused government with society."

All these ideas are implicit, and many of them stated with documentation and more sharply, in Mr. Schriftgiesser's book. It is a great and salutary refresher course.

For it brings back to mind facts and occurrences and policies showing how much worse, how much more reactionary and stupidly nostalgic "normalcy" was than most of us, with our amiable indulgence toward the past, are inclined to remember. Now that the former second-lieutenants of the normalcy era, the Tafts, the Vandenburgs, the Deweys, the Stassens, seek to lead us into the era quaking with change that lies ahead of us, we need more than ever to be reminded who misled us before; and with what platitudes.

Poor Harry

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE PENDERGAST MACHINE BY THE MAN WHO SMASHED IT. By Maurice M. Milligan. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1948. 281 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM M. REDDIE

IN THE case of Boss Tom Pendergast, who has been in his grave three years, the prosecution doesn't rest. Maurice M. Milligan, the United States District Attorney who sent Pendergast to Federal prison in 1939, carries the action into 1948 with a blast against Harry S. Truman and Jim Pendergast, the Boss's nephew and his successor as head of the Kansas City political machine.

Mr. Milligan's book invites attention chiefly as an indictment of the President for using his influence to revive the Kansas City boss organization. He offers with his account a disclaimer that this is a grudge book, a disavowal that is in order since the differences between the Milligans and the Trumans have made news for nearly fifteen years.

Although Mr. Milligan eschews personalities in his book and rests his case entirely on the record, he has overdrawn his indictment in one important respect. That error occurs in his interpretation of the effect of President Truman's intervention in the Kansas City political fight which agitated the nation in the summer of 1946.

In the 1946 Congressional campaign, the President publicly announced his intention to purge a recalcitrant Democratic Congressman from Kansas City, Roger C. Slaughter.

When President Truman ordered Jim Pendergast to throw the weight of the machine into the fight against Roger Slaughter he put the local machine back into the headlines [Milligan writes], he breathed new life into an organization that for all practical purposes was as dead as a doornail.

Fact is that Truman's invasion in the 1946 primary produced a Democratic factional dispute in his home county which wrecked the machine at a time when it was coming back fast. Out of that inter-party struggle came another vote fraud scandal which Republicans still are exploiting to their great advantage against both Pendergast and Truman.

When Mr. Truman put his foot in his mouth in the Slaughter affair he obviously was not trying to rebuild the machine. He simply was sore at a Congressman who had crossed him. It is true, however, that the President's action constituted an arrogant

display of bone-crushing in the manner of the old Boss himself. It also is a fact that the White House's conspicuous association with Pendergast in this operation gave the organization a giddy sense of power and security which it abused outrageously on election day. To that extent, the Milligan charge that Truman is responsible for a resurgence of Pendergastism in 1946 is a sound, true bill.

Truman's actual role in the 1946 episode illustrates his position in the organization throughout his career, which is that of a dues-paying member who ran with the pack, never struck a blow against bossism, and consistently threw his weight against reform although he seldom had to make an embarrassing public display of the boss tag. For a long time the man from Missouri baffled his opponents with his success in creating the illusion that his relationship with T. J. Pendergast was a private affair above the unrefined boss level. Prosecutor Milligan sets out to show that Harry Truman's loyalty to Pendergast includes devotion to the machine itself, and he arrays the evidence in convincing fashion. His final exhibit concerns the Truman Administration's handling of the Federal investigations of the 1946 vote fraud cases, a stalling act that provoked a Senate inquiry which finally was blocked by a Democratic filibuster threat in 1947.

For the rest, this book is a brief but well-rounded history of the Pendergast tragedy from the eighteen eighties to the death of Tom Pendergast in 1945. As one of the principal actors in the more spectacular phases of this fantastic American morality play, Maurice Milligan should have and does have a dramatic story to tell. He tells it well. The D. A. was as perfectly cast for his part as Boss Tom was for his, as the reader will discover in the stirring chapters on the crimes, investigations, and court battles of the final Pendergast years.

This book does not go extensively into the anatomy of the machine or explore its ramifications in the American complex. Although the author does not uncover the root causes of bossism, he turns a glaring light on the principal symptoms and effects of that blighting disease. With chilling effect, Mr. Milligan reviews the record, which demonstrates that corruption of the ballot is the most destructive of the machine evils. He performed a notable service for democracy in combating that evil in Kansas City, and he carries on the good fight in a challenging book.

William Reddig, formerly of the Kansas City Star, now with the Charlotte (N. C.) News-Observer, wrote "Tom's Town," published last year.

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Fiction. *The recurring lists of best-selling novels offer an entertaining subject for speculation. Why has Thornton Wilder's collection of fictional letters, memoranda, and odds and ends of Julius Caesar's later days, revealed in the scholarly "The Ides of March," so rapidly reached third place? Why has Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s immense and forbiddingly complex "Raintree County" climbed to second place? On the other hand, why does so charming and tranquilizing a novel as "Cry, the Beloved Country," by Alan Paton, stay in the sixteenth and last place, while Joshua Liebman's soothing "Peace of Mind" remains week after week glued to the first place of the non-fiction lists? Why does Truman Capote's highly publicized and controversial novel stay next to the last? Of the books reviewed this week Elizabeth Goudge's will offer forgetfulness; Lenard Kaufman's, alarm at juvenile murder; Allan Seager's, a revelation of small-town suppression; and George R. Stewart's, sudden excitement.*

The Ogre of a Small Town

THE INHERITANCE. By Allan Seager. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1948. 337 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD B. GEHMAN

ALLAN SEAGER belongs to that little group of college professor-writers which, perhaps to the discomfiture of the "professionals," has been making a distinct place for itself in American writing during the past decade. Robert Penn Warren, Wallace Stegner, Lionel Trilling, and I. J. Kapstein are a few of the better-known members of this set, from which we have come to expect fiction of a distinguished, if rather eclectic, order. In many respects, Seager is the best of the bunch: he is a far better storyteller than most, and he has a gift for sketching character in two or three lines that must be the envy of all.

It is this ability that tempers the main objection that can be aimed at this author's second novel (the first was "Equinox," which enjoyed considerable critical acclaim and a sale of some 25,000 copies). If Seager has a principal fault, it is his lack of restraint. He spells out his theme again and again, leaving nothing to the imagination, and the book might have been cut profitably by almost one-third. Yet when one looks back on some of the graphic, touching, and

shocking scenes, and realizes that the author has given us so many characters done so remarkably well, one is inclined to forgive him.

"The Inheritance" is set in a Michigan town big enough to have two movie theatres, two fairly good restaurants, and a brothel. It is the story of Walter Phelps, the son of a bank president, the last in a line of bankers. Shortly after the book opens, the boy Walter watches his father fight and lick the father of his best friend. The victory makes such an impression on him that he comes to think that his father can do no wrong.

After the death of both his parents in an automobile accident, Walter finds an astonishing collection of pornography in his father's room. A little later, he overhears some former business associates discussing his father in slanderous terms. He finds, in addition, that his inheritance, financially speaking, is not as large as he had imagined it would be. All these things do nothing to vitiate the image he has created. Walter's real inheritance—the mantle of his father—leads him into a series of defiant acts against the town: he gets in a drunken brawl in a hotel room; he takes a prostitute to a country-club-set party. Ultimately, he is committed for insanity.

This is only the barest outline of the story, and does not allow for the character of Eddie Burcham, Walter's best friend. Eddie serves as a sort of powerless conscience; he is a tuberculosis patient who gradually gives up fighting the disease. Toward the end, he says to Walter,

You and I are already too old to change this town much. We were born and brought up in it and it has tainted us. And there is nothing in the way we were brought up to suggest to us that anything is worth



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