

broader spectrum of New Deal literature, such as recent work on theories of the state, social movements, and class relations in sociology, economic crises in economics, to name just a few, Biles falls short of being able to explain convincingly the impact of the New Deal for the American people and its implication for the contemporary period.

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Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press 1992).

Can “radical” writers produce great works, live virtuously, and change the world? This book examines a generation of intellectuals in the United States who believed in these possibilities. Like reformers, revolutionaries and other iconoclasts in subsequent eras, they achieved much less than they sought, and their experiences raise pertinent questions about the historical role of progressive intellectuals in North American politics during the twentieth century.

Biel examines the lives of a community of American writers born between 1881 and 1899 who did most of their publishing between 1910 and 1945. Their ranks included both the relatively obscure and the undeniably illustrious. Among the most famous were Walter Lippmann, Edmund Wilson, John Reed, John Dos Passos, Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Margaret Sangster. Because he was an “independent” intellectual and an acerbic social critic, H.L. Mencken is also included in this examination, although the author acknowledges that his politics depart from those of his largely leftist contemporaries.

What united most of these individuals was their determination to apply their craft without benefit of university affiliation, and in a way that would inspire the working classes to eliminate or at least radically transform American capitalism. The progressive writers’ new world order would be humane, non-exploitative, and culturally enriched. Intellectual work — from poetry to historical writing — should serve the cause of social reform. Ivory tower academics who sought to

keep their distance from life’s gritty struggles were dismissed as elitist — corrupted by the lure of tenure and the privileges of professional status.

Their desire to marry politics and art led to some extraordinary adventures and some influential publications. The romantic escapades of John Reed in Moscow and his myth-making book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, shaped the way thousands of North Americans, particularly leftists, subsequently perceived the Russian Revolution. Magazines such as *New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Masses* were important forums for creative, critical writing. The social and literary criticism of Lewis Mumford and Edmund Wilson and the political journalism of Walter Lippmann reached large, appreciative audiences. Van Wyck Brooks even received a Pulitzer Prize for his lively portraits of American politicians.

Of course there was some irony associated with such successes; fame and plaudits were enjoyed by these former heretics long after their political dreams had faded. Edmund Wilson became positively right wing after the Second World War, while Lewis Mumford’s acclaimed books reflected his difficult intellectual journey from communism to humanism. *Life* magazine treated Brooks’s biographies as patriotic Americana, which is not exactly what the author had had in mind.

Even before the era of Cold War disillusionment, many of the cultural activists were felled by the potent force of paradox. Favoring the “cult of poverty” over the evils of acquisitive materialism, socialist intellectuals discovered that industrial workers sought to avoid poverty at all costs and to accumulate as much wealth as possible. University employment might be considered appropriate only for intellectuals without integrity, but in order to survive, a number of writers made their own Faustian pacts by profiting from commercial journalism, public lecturing, or other forms of entrepreneurialism. (On the eve of the depression Walter Lippmann was earning \$45000 a year). Others lived off inheritances which also supported their friends.

In addition, some cultural activists justified the politics of the Communist Party even after it was exposed to be the relentless enemy of the “independent” intellectual. And while paying lip-service to gender equality, several

of these writers treated their wives with utter disdain, explaining their extra-marital affairs as a necessary form of artistic expression.

Biel explores these tensions with a critical but sympathetic eye. He appreciates the courage of his subjects whose politics and lifestyles, at least for a time, left them on the margins of American society. Like others who were part of the Old Left, they took up unpopular causes on behalf of unions, civil liberties, and educational reform. In so doing, they left a healthy and intriguing body of writing which will endure for generations still.

But they could also be self-righteous, intolerant, hypocritical and wrong. In reading this book, I was struck, uncomfortably, by the ways in which the New Left of the 1960s played out its own version of these earlier struggles. Though most 60s activists rejected the Communist Party, and kept up their affiliation with universities, there were other political perceptions — and illusions — which they shared with their leftist predecessors. They romanticized the political orientation of the working class, viewed it monolithically, and also failed to forge an effective partnership with it. Like middle-class radicals of other eras, including Biel's subjects, they could not quite decide whether they should attempt to lead or follow working-class organizations to the promised land. If the former, they risked elitism of their own; if the latter, they rendered meaningless the special role of intellectuals in political and labour movements.

Furthermore, as historian Patricia Jasen has noted, the New Left insisted on the virtue and necessity of intellectual autonomy, while, paradoxically, privileging with the university an ideology of social change. ["In Pursuit of Human Values (or Laugh When they Say That): The Student Critique of the Arts Curriculum in the 1960s," in Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Montreal 1989) 247-271]. Thus university curricula should be "relevant" and political. But did this leave room for the non-aligned (independent) student, teacher, poet or artist? New Leftists had not satisfactorily resolved this intellectual dilemma before the movement went into decline. In the end, the sense of disillusionment that many New Leftists experienced echoed

the political frustrations of socialists and ex-Communists of earlier times, as Biel's study reveals.

Along with idealism, the Left — old and new — brought naïveté and a poor sense of its own history to the world of political engagement. This seemed especially true of radical intellectuals. If the Left has a future that is to be more enduring than its past, it should learn some lessons from nearly a century of activism. Biel's book is a reasonable place to begin that exploration.

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Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott, *The Nations Within: Aboriginal-State Relations in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1992).

This study begins with the observation that very little comparative analysis has been done in studies of aboriginal politics and the authors intend to rectify that situation. Unfortunately, however, the book promises more than it delivers; neither specialists nor general readers will come away from it with a much better understanding of Native politics in any of the three countries selected for comparison. The authors ask all the pertinent and difficult questions about improving the situation of aboriginal peoples but do not offer much in the way of analysis or potential solutions. Indeed, in the conclusion, they offer the observation that, "Reform is inevitable" (231), leaving the reader more than a little perplexed about how the many hurdles that they have noted will be overcome.

The authors are sociologists with an interest in the position of ethnic groups in modern liberal democracies. Because their focus is contemporary, it might seem unfair to criticize their use of history, but they do make frequent references to the importance of history in understanding the issues. Unfortunately, historians will be distressed at the authors' use of history. More often than not, the authors simply assert that the history is important without providing any of it as evidence. When they do make statements of historical "fact," these are often gross generalizations that are easily challenged. For example, we are informed