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Clarence E. Jr.. Wunderlin. *The Papers of Robert A. Taft.* Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1997. xlvii + 620 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-572-5.

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The Emergence of Robert A. Taft

Robert A. Taft was arguably the most important Ohio politician of the first half of the twentieth century, perhaps of the entire century. By the early l950s, his hard work and reputation for personal integrity had won him the title "Mr. Republican," though most voters apparently considered him too conservative, too regional, and above all, too dull to be president. The standard biography, by James T. Patterson, devotes relatively little attention to Taft's pre-senatorial career or to Ohio politics. Taft's early letters, speeches, and editorials, capably edited and annotated by Clarence Wunderlin, thus provide a welcome opportunity to reexamine Taft's early life and emerging political career.

The papers confirm the judgment of the early l950s: Taft was personally ill-suited for the television age. (He admitted as early as l922 that "while I have no difficulty talking, I don't know how to do any of the eloquence business which makes for enthusiasm or applause" [p. 271].). But they also reveal a man of superior intellect, a conservative who was receptive to new ideas, and a politician whose instinctive identification with the business community became the basis for highly successful attacks on the New Deal.

The first section, devoted to Taft's childhood, education, and early legal career, is a reminder of how good it was to be wealthy and well-born in the years before World War I. The dutiful elder son of President William Howard Taft, Robert attended the best schools (the family-operated Taft school in Connecticut, Yale, and Harvard Law), hob-nobbed with the sons and daughters of other aristocratic families, traveled widely, lived comfortably despite virtually no income, married an heiress, Martha Bowers, and generally took his privileged life for granted. Yet Taft had little in common with most recent first children. Despite his good fortune, he was serious, scholarly, dedicated, and unpretentious. While taking advantage of his elite status, he always assumed that he would have to make his own way in the world. In later years, he increasingly devoted his energies to business activities. In the mid-l920s, for example, he abruptly withdrew from politics–although he was speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives and a likely gubernatorial candidate–to build his law practice and personal fortune.

Apart from his father, the individual who had the greatest impact on Taft's early career was Herbert Hoover. Their relationship began during World War I, when Taft served in the Food Administration and then assisted Hoover in providing food relief to eastern Europe. In l920 and l928, Taft enthusiastically supported Hoover's campaigns for the Republican presidential nomination. He also absorbed Hoover's approach to politics and government. As a state legislator and influential Cincinnati Republican, Taft championed a variety of moderate reforms designed to modernize government and enhance economic efficiency. By l930, he had a well-deserved reputation as a pragmatic urban politician who had struggled mightily, and with some success, to update Ohio's public institutions. The Depression of the l930s turned Taft's world upside-down. It apparently did not hurt his law practice or his quest for a personal fortune–major worries of the previous decade–but it devastated his political circle. His father died in l930, he lost a reelection campaign for the state senate (to which he had been elected in l930 on a platform pledging tax reform) in l932, and his friend Hoover, together with other friends and associates who served in the Hoover Administration and the Federal Reserve, were discredited. For the first time in his life Taft was politically adrift. Yet he soon found a new focus in opposition to the New Deal, which would henceforth serve as a negative reference point for his political career.

Taft's response to the New Deal brought to the surface values and ideas that had been implicit in his earlier career. He had never devoted much thought or attention to the poor or unemployed. By l935, he endorsed federal

relief programs (though not the New Dealers' management methods), unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and government regulated collective bargaining. He was sufficiently liberal on these issues to win the backing of the AFL. He also supported government regulation of the banking and securities industries. He acknowledged that Roosevelt had addressed issues that previous leaders, notably Hoover, had overlooked. Yet such achievements paled beside Roosevelt's sins. Most outrageous were the President's misguided efforts to plan and direct economic activity, to centralize power and decision-making in Washington, and to extend the government's regulatory arm into virtually every facet of business life. For Taft, the NRA and the AAA epitomized what was wrong with the New Deal. If unchecked, they would inexorably lead to socialism, political tyranny, and perpetual depression.

Taft now had a cause and a goal, but a goal that could not be realized in Cincinnati or Columbus. Typically, he began his crusade by reorganizing the Cincinnati Republican organization. By l937 he was confident of his local base and ran for the U.S. Senate. His comparatively easy victory over the incumbent, Robert Bulkley, set the stage for his return to Washington, a national role, and ultimately, a quest for the presidency. Volume One ends with Taft's Senate victory. Although three additional volumes will follow, this work demonstrates that the dull, owlish figure of early l950s newsreels and television broadcasts was not the Taft that Ohio politicos and voters had come to know. It is also an indispensable resource on Ohio in the l920s and l930s. Best of all, it proves that Ohio politics in the interwar years were not the exclusive province of Vic Donahey, Martin Davey, John W. Bricker, and others of their ilk.

Wunderlin has included a large selection of Taft family photos and an extensive bibliography.

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