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Kendrick A. Clements. *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. xxxi + 207pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1033-4.

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Herbert Hoover Through the Lens of Environmental History

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The frustrations induced by this innovative and thoughtful study by Kendrick A. Clements are far outweighed by the satisfaction it ultimately provides. This is no small compliment in view of the ambitious nature of Clements's task: to provide a biography of Herbert Hoover through the lens of environmental history. This involves much more than just addressing in chronological order all of Hoover's environmental actions and the philosophies behind those actions. Certainly Clements provides this, but he also demonstrates how Hoover's childhood, his beliefs, and his politics shaped his environmental policies, and how those policies perfectly symbolize this complex man who frequently worked toward a variety of public goals that ultimately proved to be mutually exclusive. To understand Hoover's environmental policies goes a long way towards understanding the man. And to understand the man, according to Clements, is to understand the conservation movements of his era, movements that have previously been ignored or misunderstood.

Clements, professor of history at the University of South Carolina, is the author of two biographies of Woodrow Wilson and one of William Jennings Bryan. In the seventeen years since the publication of "Herbert Hoover and Conservationism, 1921-33" in the *American Historical Review*, which was Clements's first attempt to chronicle the thirty-first president's unique relationship with natural resources, he became increasingly interested in the complex relationship between consumerism and the environment. He grew skeptical of the prevailing view that the Republican administration of the 1920s was anticonservationist and best exemplified by the Teapot Dome scandal. Clements explores at length Hoover's efforts prior to the crash of 1929 to reconcile the new consumerism with traditional moral values, for Hoover saw an intelligent conservation policy as the key to an efficient, prosperous, and ultimately happy society.

Clements's first chapter movingly describes Hoover's difficult childhood as the foundation of many of his strengths and weaknesses as an adult. His father died when "Bert" was only six, and his mother followed a little over three years later. The orphaned Hoover was taken in by relatives. Many years later he told a friend, in a confidence that speaks reams, "that he was twelve years old in this strict Quaker family before he realized…that if you did anything for your own personal happiness and satisfaction, God wouldn't strike you dead" (p. 13). Despite this ability to view critically such a strict and rigid world view, Hoover nonetheless had clearly internalized many of its major tenants, including a belief in plain living, hard work, and religious and economic individualism which lasted a lifetime and would render him loath to accept government relief programs, even as the Great Depression deepened. Also, Clements maintains, Hoover's lack of love as a child trained him to hide his emotions in public, contributing to his reputation as cool, aloof, even uncaring, even as he practiced charity on both a personal and national scale.

Driven to succeed, young Hoover was a diligent student and hard worker, yet managed to develop a lifelong passion for fishing that would later fuel his many efforts to combat water pollution and to cultivate well stocked lakes, rivers and streams. Clements concludes that Hoover's childhood molded his unique perspective on environmental issues. Rather than side with the utilitarian wing of the Progressive Era environmental movement, which stressed the conservation of resources for future use, or the preservationist wing, which emphasized protecting resources completely for their own sake, Hoover did not see the two views as mutually exclusive. For him, "the beautiful must also be useful," and conservation policies had to be freely embraced at the individual

level rather than imposed from above.

Despite the depression of 1896, Hoover worked as a miner before finally securing an engineering position. Enjoying his self-made success, Hoover believed in efficiency, especially that brought by technological advances, as the key to prosperity and happiness. He also believed strongly in volunteerism, and insisted that philanthropy be administered with the utmost efficiency and integrity. It is in his careful presentations of Hoover's complex beliefs about war, peace, commerce, technology, economic growth, and volunteerism that Clement really shines. Although he treats Hoover sympathetically, he does not hesitate to offer thoughtful critical commentary.

Hoover, Clements asserts, believed in managed voluntarism and controlled decentralization, beliefs that guided his efforts to provide relief to war-torn Belgium. He was also highly sensitive to criticism. Clements digs deep in his efforts to understand Hoover, noting that "the constant tension between Hoover's need for control and his intellectual commitment to voluntarism and decentralization offers a key to understanding apparent contradictions in his personality and behavior that are otherwise baffling" (pp. 37-38).

The Hoover described by Clements saw no conflict in urging his fellow Americans to be self-reliant, frugal, and simple, while at the same time he extolled market economics, consumerism, and interdependence. Clements sees Hoover as attempting to straddle two centuries, glorying in the rising standards of the technological age, yet clinging to the romantic notions of rugged individualism that so dominated the pre-industrial world. The government's job, according to Hoover, was not to dictate, but to induce active cooperation. Of particular concern was the management of the consumption of leisure, for Hoover was convinced that politics could combine conservation and consumption, resulting in an affirmation of spiritual and cultural values.

Hoover firmly held to a variety of beliefs concerning the relationship between government and the environment. He strongly supported guided volunteerism: programs initiated and guided by government experts, but implemented voluntarily. According to Clements, as Hoover's career progressed, he "was more aware of environmental problems than most of his contemporaries, and more eager to attack them, [but] his definition of the issue in solely economic terms, plus his philosophy of volunteerism and local autonomy, seriously limited what he was willing to propose in the way of solutions" (p. 69). Despite the fact that as the limitations of his policies became evident (his efforts to implement western fisheries policies, for example, are termed "sadly inadequate" by Clements), and their failures obvious even to Hoover, he remained incapable throughout his lifetime of trying alternatives.

Clements convincingly demonstrates that time and time again, Hoover's personal beliefs about American character and the economy dictated his policies, and led all too frequently to disappointing results. Clement also details Hoover's important work within the Commerce Department to make waste reduction a major goal, not just in procuring raw materials, but in the production process as well. Hoover's dedication to the most complete and efficient use of natural resources led to his 1926 remark that, "Every drop of water that runs to the sea without yielding its full commercial value is an economic waste" (p. 79). This belief dictated Hoover's role in efforts to bring about the Colorado River compact, affecting seven western states. Clements attributes the ultimate failure of the superpower project to the fact that Hoover was "still thinking like an engineer rather than a politician" (p. 89)

As the successful organizer of the international relief of Belgium during World War I, and as the director of relief following the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, Hoover gained the reputation as "Specialist in Public Calamities" that encouraged many to consider him as presidential material. Clements, however, points out troubling elements of the Mississippi effort, especially in view of the impending depression. Hoover preferred to attribute the success of the flood project to volunteerism, rather than to acknowledge his own "essentially dictatorial" role, or the fact that state and federal governments provided leadership, equipment, personnel and two-thirds of the money. Even more troubling to Clements is the fact that Hoover stubbornly cited low death figures associated with the flood even after they had been clearly discredited. And, significantly, Hoover refused to provide direct relief to the victims of the catastrophe. Nonetheless, much of his successful presidential campaign was due to the public's confidence in his established ability to deal with crises – not, of course, that any were anticipated.

Chapter Seven, which clearly defines the Hoover administration's polymorphous conservation philosophy showcases Clements's adeptness at explaining complex programs and ideas. Chapter Eight, which details Hoover's struggles with the Commission on the Public Domain, reinforces Clements' assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Hoover's environmental

philosophies, but is the least compelling of all the chapters. More interesting is Clements's evaluation of Hoover's failure to recognize reforestation and other resource conservation efforts as legitimate public works projects to provide relief as the depression deepened. Despite his genuine concern for both the environment and the public, Hoover remained a prisoner of his own unique blend of personal, political, and economic beliefs.

Following his defeat at the hands of Franklin Roosevelt, an embittered Hoover spent the rest of his life working to weaken the federal government Roosevelt had fortified. In issues of conservation, as with virtually everything else, Hoover still advocated informed volunteerism and decentralized control. And yet he publicly and fiercely defended the Republicans as the party of conservation and tried, with little success, to persuade President Dwight Eisenhower to embrace his views, especially concerning water and power resources.

Clements's flaws in *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism* are minor. On page seventeen he notes that "equality of the sexes" had been a tenant of the Quakers since their founding in the seventeenth century, yet five pages earlier he suggests that some of Hulda Hoover's fellow Quakers might have been offended had they known of her private support for women's suffrage. It's his omissions that are more troubling. Clements concludes that Hoover's career should not be considered tragic, since his ideas prefigured the environcapitalist movement and embodied the same values that Samuel P. Hays has attributed to the popular environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. A few more paragraphs fleshing out this legacy would have been particularly welcome, especially in view of two assertions in Clements's preface: that Hoover did not anticipate the post-war environmental movement Hays described, and that the ideals Hoover held due to his background and personal taste vied with those he acquired by training and profession, creating tensions "relevant to our own times as well" (p. x). Also, while it is unfair to demand that a necessarily limited biography delve into all aspects of Hoover's life, after Clements's careful analysis of Hoover's childhood, it is especially frustrating to learn virtually nothing about his own qualities as a parent. Even a few sentences on Hoover as father (and as husband) would have been quite illuminating.

Clements' strengths, however, easily outweigh his weaknesses. During sections where Clements is appropriately critical of Hoover, his writing conveys his frustration with, rather than contempt for, his subject. He strives to understand rather than merely condemn Hoover's myriad mistakes, and is careful to point out the many instances where Hoover's conservation philosophies and policies are worthy of praise. In all, Clements has produced a biography that adds to our understanding of Herbert Hoover as well as American environmental history.

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