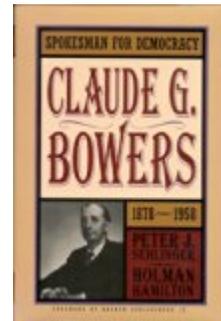


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter J. Sehlinger, Holman Hamilton. *Spokesman for Democracy: Claude G. Bowers, 1878-1958*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2000. xxi + 358 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-145-8.

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A Jeffersonian Admirer at Home and Abroad

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Holman Hamilton died before finishing his work, and the book was ably completed by Peter Sehlinger. Hamilton, as a young historian, had the advantage of knowing the elderly Bowers well. Claude Bowers enjoyed remarkable success in three distinct careers, but he is little remembered today except by political historians. He was raised in Indianapolis and first made his mark as a high school debater, in the 1890s far more important than basketball in Indiana. His family lacked the money for college, and at the age of twenty he began his career as a journalist for a Democratic newspaper during the second McKinley-Bryan campaign. He was both a skilled writer and an enthusiastic Democrat, although his own campaigns for Congress in 1904 and 1906 were unsuccessful. He never again sought elective office, but spoke often and eloquently for Democratic candidates. In 1911 he moved to Washington as secretary to the newly-elected Senator John Worth Kern, soon to become majority leader. After Kern's loss in 1916 Bowers returned to journalism, first in Fort Wayne, then in New York, as editorial writer and columnist for Ralph Pulitzer's *New York Evening World*, later for William Randolph Hearst's *New York Evening Journal*.

Despite the pressures of daily deadlines, Bowers managed to find time and energy for historical research. Long an admirer of Thomas Jefferson, he published *Jefferson and Hamilton* to great acclaim, from Franklin D. Roosevelt as well as Samuel Flagg Bemis in the *American*

Historical Review. The book became a best-seller and played a major part in making Thomas Jefferson a popular hero, especially among Democrats. Bowers was now a respected historian as well as a journalist. *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* was more controversial, but also a best-seller. Bowers was a man of strong racial prejudice for a northern Democrat, even by the standards of 1929.

Bowers traveled widely to speak for Roosevelt in 1932, and his reward was appointment as ambassador to Spain, an office for which he had no visible qualification. Career foreign service officers naturally resented his success, but Bowers threw himself wholeheartedly into his new role. He developed a deep affection for Spain, but possessed only a limited understanding of the complexities of Spanish politics. More than half his term was spent in French exile during the Spanish Civil War. Bowers naturally sympathized with the Republicans, whom he regarded as a kind of Jeffersonian democratic movement, and rejected all suggestions of communist influence.

Forced to make way in 1939 for a new ambassador to the victorious fascists, Bowers was immediately named by Roosevelt as ambassador to Chile. He had grown fond of the diplomatic life, and remained in Chile for a remarkable fourteen years. While his service in Spain has always been controversial, "Don Claudio of Santiago" was an unquestioned success in Chile although he never mastered conversational Spanish. Finally retiring at seventy-five, Bowers spent his last years quietly in New York,

still busy writing. *My Mission to Spain: Watching the Rehearsal for World War II*, was immediately translated into Spanish, French, and Italian. He also published an account of his years in Chile and a memoir which appeared after his death.

As journalist, orator, historian and diplomat, Claude Bowers was a consistent advocate of democracy. He supported Progressivism, the New Deal, and the Fair Deal, a model liberal Democrat on every issue except racial justice, which he never accepted. In this he may have followed the footsteps of his great hero, Thomas Jefferson.

Hamilton and Sehlinger set themselves a very difficult task in writing the life of a man who wrote so much and so well about himself. They generally allow Bowers to speak for himself, but never uncritically. This is a fine book, solidly documented and a pleasure to read, from which we can all learn much about politics, diplomacy, and even the life of Washington Irving in Spain. Without the benefit of a college education, Bowers published fifteen books, at least three of them genuine best-sellers, and enjoyed long success too as a journalist and a diplomat. No one could dare hope to do the same today.

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