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H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories. *http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229*

H-Diplo Review Essay of:

Brian Morton, *Woodrow Wilson: United States* (Makers of the Modern World; the Peace conferences of 1919-23 and their Aftermath). London: Haus Publishing Ltd, 2008. 246 pp., ISBN 978-1-905791-62-0 (hardback, $19.95, L 12.99).

URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-UnitedStates.pdf

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **John Milton Cooper, Jr., University of Wisconsin-Madison**

This short and to-the-point book deserves a review of the same kind. First, the good news: This book delivers on its promise and the promise of its series to produce portraits and evaluations of the major participants in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its aftermath: in this case, Woodrow Wilson. Brian Morton has set himself the task of looking at Wilson whole, avoiding reductionism, and placing the president's work in context.[1] Morton, who is a Scottish writer and journalist, not a historian of this period, has produced a sound and incisive portrait of Wilson as a leader. Take, for example, this characterization: "For Wilson, the role of the politician was to give shape to the inchoate needs, ambitions and fears of the populace, to cast them in a form that addressed the common weal in a way not only practical but also persuasive enough to bring the

[1] On a point of personal privilege, I am one of the targets in his gallery of those who have practiced reductionism on Wilson because I entitled a book *The Warrior and the Priest* and made use of Nietzsche's concepts in it. I certainly did not intend to be reductionist toward either Wilson or the book's other subject, Theodore Roosevelt, and at the risk of sounding starchy I might suggest another look at the book.

people into line behind it."[2] That is as good a capsule description of Wilson's approach to politics as I have read.

Likewise, when it comes to the peace conference and the League of Nations, Morton captures Wilson's basic approach quite well. About the peace conference he notes that writers such as John Maynard Keynes, William C. Bullitt, and Harold Nicolson "lent the attempt to bring peace the same iconic and very literary quality that the Western Front had derived from the 'war poets'; Keynes in particular, and Nicolson more circumstantially, did much later to create the received view of the Conference as producing a botched and vindictive half-peace, foredoomed to be broken."[3] Morton wisely rejects that angle of vision and follows the work of Margaret Macmillan in portraying the peacemakers in different and better lights.

On Wilson's work to found the League of Nations and get his country to become a leading member, Morton concludes, "Wilson was an evolutionist. The root of his pragmatism was the belief that once an idea or a principle was given light and air, it would begin to interact with reality, present need, other potentially competing principles and would behave in the most straightforward way like a living organism. To expect any great idea to emerge complete and fully functioning, an imago that had never gone through the larval stage, was to Wilson foolish naivety."[4] That nicely cuts through allegations of foolish idealism and messianism and gets to the heart of Wilson's approach. For all these insights and approaches, Morton is to be commended, all the more so because he is not someone who has spent long years immersing himself in the sources and literature about his subject. I mean that as a sincere compliment, with no hint of patronizing. I also mention this circumstance because it helps to explain the book's myriad defects.

Now the bad news: It becomes exceedingly difficult to appreciate the fine qualities of this book and sometimes hard to read it all because it is full of silly, careless, distracting errors. Some of these are boneheaded mistakes of fact, such as "Bryn Mawr College in Massachusetts." President "William Garfield," and Theodore Roosevelt defeating William Jennings Bryan in 1904.[5] Those are just a sample of such elementary factual mistakes. Interspersed among them are errors at a different level, such as characterizing Bryan as a conservative force in the Democratic Party, alleging that Wilson let Bryan resign as secretary of state because courting Edith Galt left him in a "volatile" emotional state, and

[2] Morton, *Woodrow Wilson*, p. 46.

[3] Ibid., 157.

[4] Ibid., p. 199.

[5] Ibid., pp. 48, 53, 56. Lest I sound like a prickly Yank skewering an innocent Brit, let me put the shoe on the other foot by saying "Newnham College at Oxford," Prime Minister "Sir Lionel Campbell-Bannerman," and Winston Churchill defeating Ramsay MacDonald.

saying that Wilson was jealous of Henry Cabot Lodge's "reputation as an intellectual."[6] Add to those errors such bloopers as asserting that Wilson unilaterally reversed the Panama Canal tolls exemption for American ships (he pushed its repeal through Congress) and asserting that his meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in August 1919 was "an even greater and more damaging misjudgement than the fateful speaking tour to the West and Midwest that began just two weeks later. "[7]

Finally come dubious matters of interpretation. Let me list just a few. One is a flatfooted assertion that the peace issue toward the World War determined the outcome of the 1916 election (what about progressivism, the comparative state of the parties, and Mexico?). Another is the cursory and unsatisfying account of Wilson's decision to enter the war (mercifully, though, Morton omits "safe for democracy"). Another is failure to note that "self-determination" was not a term Wilson coined (Lloyd George did) and was not included in the Fourteen Points (which Morton otherwise discusses well), together with failure to mention the massive German offensive on the Western Front in 1918. Morton does a good job of recounting how the negotiations at the peace conference wore Wilson out, but he takes the position that the president traded away too much for the sake of the League without demonstrating how this happened. Then, in the League fight at home, he gives the shortest of shrift to Wilson's stroke. I sympathize with Morton's effort to avoid overexplaining events through Wilson's medical condition, but this is the time when that simply cannot be avoided. It is undeniable that the League fight would have turned out differently if the president had not suffered that stroke --- the argument begins in assessing how different or better or worse the outcome might have been.

It pains me to dwell on the weaknesses of this book. The author has gone a long way on a little bit of research and reading about Wilson, and he has produced a sound account of the man and his approach to politics. I have no reservations about recommending this book as an introduction to Wilson as a statesman and peacemaker --- provided the reader is willing to put up with the steady barrage of errors great and small and maintain proper skepticism about many of the judgments herein.

John Milton Cooper, Jr. is E. Gordon Fox Professor Emeritus of American Institutions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he has taught since 1970. He is a graduate of Princeton University and took his M.A. and Ph.D. at Columbia University. He is the author of five previous books, including The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt and Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations. He has held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities and has been a Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He has served as Fulbright Professor of American history at Moscow State University, and for fifteen years he was a

[6] Ibid., 95, 189.

[7] Ibid., 193.

member of the Editorial Advisory Committee to The Papers of Woodrow Wilson. He appeared on and was a consultant to the television biography of Theodore Roosevelt and chief historian to the television biography of Woodrow Wilson, both of which appeared on the Public Broadcasting System's "American Experience." He lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and Harpswell, Maine.

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