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Twentieth-Century Oklahoma: Reflections on the Forty-Sixth State by Richard Lowitt (review)

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volume fills in some important gaps in an important story and that makes it a worthwhile read.

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Twentieth-Century Oklahoma: Reflections on the Forty-Sixth State. By Richard Lowitt. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016, Pp. 424. Notes, illustrations, index.)

Twentieth-Century Oklahoma, a collection of eleven essays by historian Richard Lowitt, argues that Oklahoma has “produced a fascinating history similar to and yet markedly different from those of its neighboring states” (3).

Lowitt devotes three chapters to the search for Oklahoma identity. Admitted into the Union in 1906, the Sooner State was both a collection of American Indian tribes removed there from points elsewhere and a source of land for prospective settlers. But as a young state with a marginalized population, it had little local literature or history. By the mid-1920s, Bennett Bizzell, president of the University of Oklahoma, sought to redefine the state as part of a larger region, the Southwest, with a distinctive history and culture. Identification with regionalism proved to be a defining act for the university, making it a major research and collections center for local history and culture.

Lowitt examines two early giants of regionalism, Edward Everett Dale and Angie Debo, through their voluminous correspondence from 1925–1972, concluding that each brought the region—and Oklahoma—before a national audience. Lowitt further explores the contours of Oklahoma identity. Like Texas, a state on its southern border, there is no consensus whether Oklahoma is “a southern state, a plains state or a southwestern state” (68). Nevertheless, Lowitt points out that Oklahoma, with its diverse environment, population, and cultures, is, and always has been, a land of transition where people, ideas, and traditions mingle.

Lowitt surveys a wide range of topics in Oklahoma history, from Fort Sill (during the Missile Age) and Indian health issues to developing the Grand River Dam and the farm crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. Fort Sill during the Cold War and the construction of the Grand River Dam bring into focus competition for use for the land between public and private interests. The problems associated with Indian health care services and the farm crisis pit private citizens (American Indians and farmers) against government termination policies concerning subsidies and support. These topics and others address important questions of modernity: land use, race, ethnicity, rural and urban interests, and social justice.

The final section of the book is biographical, focusing on Congressman Mike Monroney and Senator Mike Synar. Monroney was a long-

standing Democrat (1939–1969) who achieved notable accomplishments for his constituents. But to Lowitt, he remains an enigma, due in part to the burning of his papers. What emerges from available evidence, Lowitt concludes, is that he avoided controversial issues, sought the “middle ground,” and championed topics amenable to Oklahoma voters. Synar, however, was more of a maverick who was genuinely concerned about equitable public policy. In his 1987 war on the ranching West, he introduced legislation to increase grazing fees on public lands, thereby exposing powerful ranchers who fed their cattle at “the public trough,” all the while claiming the mantle of rugged individualism and free enterprise.

These eleven, well-researched essays do not purport to be a complete picture of twentieth-century Oklahoma. Based on selective writings by the author, they represent a “sampling” of topics from the smorgasbord table. Overall, they support the author’s purpose, showing how Oklahoma shares similar themes with neighboring states, such as land use and water power, while revealing the state’s unique history and identity, one closely associated with Indian affairs and regional culture. For those seeking a seamless narrative of Oklahoma history, there are voids in the story. But for those readers wanting a range of topics within a regional context, *Twentieth-Century Oklahoma* does not disappoint.

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