

Book Reviews:

By Thomas Misa. *A Nation of Steel: The Making of Modern America, 1865-1925.*

(Baltimore, Maryland and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Pp. 367.)

On the evidence from Thomas Misa's extended analysis, the steel industry, like steel itself, is far more complex and diverse than historians have customarily thought. For those whose image of this fundamental sector has been organized around great firms (U.S. Steel, Bethlehem) and larger-than-life individuals (Carnegie, Schwab, Gary), the book is a revelation. Blending business, labor, and technological history, Misa provides a fascinating and detailed reconstruction of steel's dynamic course, centered thematically on products, processes, and uses, and animated by close attention to maker-customer interactions. This novel conceptualization stresses variation and user feedback effects; highlights both innovation and error, and creates a durable framework for understanding steel's economic, institutional, and technical development.

Misa fashions his narrative in six segments that overlap chronologically, each revolving around steelmakers' crucial relationships concerning, respectively, rails for railroads, structural forms for high-rise architects and builders, armor for the state, heavy rails for rebuilding roads after bankruptcy reorganizations, tool steel for fabricators, and alloys and sheet for the auto trades. Multiple collateral issues are deftly woven across these main strands: technological succession, testing and research, patent pooling and market control, regulation, mergers, etc. The resulting dynamic maze could be overwhelming, but Misa opens each chapter with a more or less familiar story that captures the reader's attention and frames the key issues ahead. Thus we revisit the last heroic push to join the Union Pacific's transcontinental tracks, Frederick Taylor's pathbreaking tool-hardening experiments, and J. P. Morgan's yacht, *Corsair*, where the stability-obsessed financier brokered a truce between the Pennsylvania Railroad and the New York Central, outmaneuvering Andrew Carnegie and setting the stage for the epic U.S. Steel merger. Through these humanizing introductions, Misa remind us that multiple vectors of change were simultaneously in motion and that reading inevitability into industrial outcomes fatally injures explanation.

Along the road insights abound, some of them breathtaking. For example, railmakers met the 1890s depression's merciless competition with "reckless mass production," a stunning speedup that cut costs and prices yet "did

[such] violence to the metal” that “in the first years of the twentieth century, steel rails . . . began chipping, cracking, splitting, mashing, and generally wearing out.” (pp. 144, 147) The resulting rail crisis triggered changes toward slower, more quality-oriented production techniques and the formation of a rail-makers cartel that hiked prices sharply (to cover increased costs) and held the price line for fifteen years. It is also instructive to find that profits from armor plate price-fixing amid the contemporaneous “big navy” surge funded both Carnegie’s and Bethlehem’s acquisitions and expansion. Here, state managers, wittingly or not, underwrote industrial empire-building. As a bonus, Misa’s closing critiques of neo-classical economic frameworks, elaborations of recent institutional theories, and dissections of labor historians’ arguments are a special treat for those intrigued by the linkages between theory, method, and narrative. In sum, this product of a scholar’s craftsmanship merits the full attention of all those interested in Pennsylvania’s industrial history. An outstanding study, *A Nation of Steel* is not likely to rust any time soon.

Philip Scranton, *Rutgers University-Camden*

By Craig Phelan. *Divided Loyalties: The Public and Private Life of Labor Leader John Mitchell.*

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Pp. xii, 438. \$19.95 paper.)

In about as appropriate a title imaginable, Craig Phelan has written a thoroughly-researched and well-written biography of Gentleman Johnny Mitchell who, at around the turn of the century, was the youngest and perhaps the best-known labor leader in America.

Born in an Illinois coal town in 1870, Mitchell—like so many others of his generation—went into the mines young, in his case at twelve years old. By the time he was twenty-two, he had developed his mining skills, had experienced the usual economic highs and lows characteristic of the industry, had joined the recently formed United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), and had married Kate O’Rourke, a coal miner’s daughter. With his keen intelligence and her emotional support, Mitchell soon became a union official, winning his first district office in 1896. Due to his skills in labor-management confrontation, his success in union-organizing drives, as well as the vicissitudes of union politics, he won the UMWA presidency three years later. He was twenty-nine years old.

The high point of Mitchell’s meteoric career came with the “Great Strike of 1902.” Working with Republican party chieftain Marcus A. Hanna, whose friendship Mitchell always assiduously courted, with

National Civic Federation leaders, and with President Theodore Roosevelt (who was sympathetic to the miners' cause), Mitchell led the 150,000 eastern Pennsylvania anthracite miners to a successful settlement after a five-month strike. While the miners did not win union recognition from the presidential arbitration commission, they did realize other gains. As a result, Phelan writes, Mitchell became the toast of the labor movement, "worshipped like a deity" (p. 188), the workers' hero who would be honored in the coal fields on "Mitchell Day" for decades to come.

Yet, for the Mitchell who "emerged from the 1902 strike as the principal spokesman for the entire labor movement" (p. 208), it was all downhill after that. The second half of Phelan's fine biography describes Mitchell's decline, which was as precipitous as his rise had been. The years of separation from his family that the demands of his position required, as well as his bouts with alcoholism, took an enormous toll on Mitchell's personal life, and adversaries within the labor movement were convinced that Mitchell's close association with corporate leaders and the Republican party betrayed his loyalty to the labor movement. His health in decline, Mitchell resigned the UMWA presidency in 1908, and after a series of serious health problems, died eleven years later. Perhaps fitting, his death in 1919 coincided with the beginning of organized labor's "Lean Years," the almost decade and a half of labor's decline before its revival with the New Deal.

For the most part, Phelan presents a fair and balanced portrait of his subject. If Mitchell was "the conservative trade union leader who could be trusted by employers" (p. 140), it was probably because he was more comfortable with them than with the men he represented. "Never one to praise the virtues of the proletariat" (pp. 104-105), Phelan writes, in his pursuit of wealth and social standing, Mitchell had not abandoned the class struggle "in return for wealth and privilege" (p. 207); he had never believed it in the first place. Yet despite Mitchell's "divided loyalties," his conflict of interests between the men he represented and their corporate bosses, and his passion for personal fortune throughout his life, Phelan believes Mitchell remained "earnestly devoted to the welfare of the rank and file." (p. 360) Perhaps indicative of his own views, Phelan, the author of a biography of AFL leader William Green, insists that Mitchell, with his reliance on labor-management cooperation and his misplaced faith in political and economic elites such as Mark Hanna and the NCF, failed to understand that the labor movement could never serve as an instrument for economic and social justice except "through the fighting spirit and solidarity of working people themselves."

Phelan's breadth of research is as impressive as his detailed and thoughtful narrative. His endnotes and bibliography cover seventy-five pages and include a wide variety of sources. Mitchell's private papers appear more revealing than most, and his correspondence, described by Phelan as volu-

minous, should serve scholars in producing studies of Mitchell's contemporaries in the history of the labor movement—as will this fine volume.

Thomas H. Coode, *Volunteer State Community College*

By Robert Zieger, *The CIO 1935-1955*.

(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1995.
pp. 495. \$39.95.)

Robert Zieger has written a valuable organizational history focused on the programs, activities, and importance of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the United Auto Workers, and the United Steelworkers of America, and the leadership roles of John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and Philip Murray in the 1930s and 1940s and Walter Reuther and David McDonald in the 1950s. Although the Flint sit-down strike and the strike wave of 1946 receive some attention, labor politics, rather than strikes, also captures the spotlight. For example, the New Deal receives much credit for CIO advances in the late 1930s and Sidney Hillman and Philip Murray are applauded for supporting World War II and securing gains for the CIO and its affiliates and for industrial workers. In the postwar era CIO leaders built on these achievements by solidifying their connections with the Democratic Party and using their Political Action Committee to promote welfare state domestic programs and an anti-Communist foreign policy, while supporting pro-labor congressional and presidential candidates. Zieger draws on speeches and convention proceedings to present the viewpoints of CIO leaders and provides much information about the CIO's membership figures and its financial condition.

Historians interested in "bottom up" history and episodes of heroism and militancy will be less satisfied with this volume. Although some strikes receive attention, the steel workers' organizing drives and the labor conflicts in Homestead, Johnstown, and Bethlehem, for example, remain unexplored. Zieger is more interested in depicting the fragility of the CIO's organizational structure and its varying, but often depleted, financial condition than in conveying the spirit of the "CIO Movement" and the "labor on the march" aspect of the strikes of the 1930 and 1940s. More generally, the rank and file do not figure prominently in the book, black workers and especially women workers remain on the margins, and such issues as the work process, worker culture and management rights receive comparatively little attention.

On the other hand, Zieger plunges into the intense historiographical debates centered around the CIO and confronts revisionist historians on several major issues. He presents the National Labor Relations Act as a positive

force for industrial workers and rejects the view that the 1930s offered missed opportunities for radical initiatives through third party politics or workplace militancy. He characterizes increasingly close connections between CIO leaders and the Democratic Party and the focus on political action in the era between 1940-1955 as an appropriate strategy for the organization and for core industrial workers. He supports Sidney Hillman and Philip Murray and praises their decision to participate in the wartime mobilization campaign and to continue their close cooperation with Roosevelt; he vehemently criticizes John L. Lewis for obstructionism and deviousness.

The role of the Communists and their sympathizers in the CIO and its affiliates has engendered much historiographical confrontation. Zieger condemns Stalinist influence in the CIO as detrimental to its image and role in American society, especially in the postwar era, and he applauds the expulsion of "communist dominated" unions from the CIO, although he expresses some reservations about the procedures used in this process. In taking this stand he recognizes the democratic character, honesty, and racial equality position of many of the expelled unions, but he views the Stalin and the foreign policy issues as more important. In offering this indictment of "communist dominated" unions, Zieger focuses on statements by national leaders rather than examining local developments. This emphasis differs from revisionists such as Robin Kelley, Robert Korstad, and Michael Honey who present a more positive image of the Communists and focus on localities.

This book is a valuable, well-researched organizational study of the CIO buttressed by nearly one hundred pages of endnotes which include references to archival and oral history materials as well as government reports, monographs, and articles. Zieger effectively describes and analyzes the organizational facet of the CIO, but the spirit of the early days and its withering away remains somewhat muted. He concludes his study with a favorable assessment of the CIO for achieving much in spite of major obstacles. The CIO receives his praise for organizing industrial workers and upgrading their way of life, for political activism, which included support for civil rights legislation, and for opposition to internal and external Stalinism. His restrained criticism focuses on the CIO's failure to champion black workers and its lack of major organizing drives to unionize government, service, and white-collar workers.

Irwin M. Marcus, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

By George Lipsitz. *Rainbow At Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940's*.

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994. Pp. x + 359.
\$49.95 cloth. \$19.95 paper.)

The debate over the success and failure of the American labor movement in the twentieth century includes perspectives of lost opportunities, transience, aspirations of mobility, corporate domination, and cultural conformity. American labor, never willing to divorce capitalism and embrace the socialist option, continues to be an enigma for historians, and organizers. In *Rainbow at Midnight*, George Lipsitz attempts to define labor's membership and failed potential in one era of labor history, the 1940s.

Rainbow At Midnight is a revised version of Lipsitz's 1981 work, *Class and Culture in Cold War America*. He states that a primary motivation for this work was his newly-gained appreciation and insight that the history of labor in the forties "illuminated many of the key issues of deindustrialization and economic restructuring that would come to dominate the eighties" (p. 3). He asserts, and demonstrates, that labor in the forties, and its important subgroups of race and gender, were never quite able to transform provincial protest into a coordinated national movement. He then suggests that these failures can be attributed, in part, to the unwillingness of corporate America to yield control and to the resistance of American culture to abandon the "Rainbow At Midnight." (The title comes from a 1946 country and western hit recorded by Earnest Tubb that describes the vision of World War II soldiers returning to a patriarchal America).

The book is divided into four parts that deftly drive Lipsitz's thesis toward its conclusion: that in spite of the movement's post-war "vision of democracy on the shop floor," labor lost the advantages it had gained during the 1940s (p. 337).

Part one examines the inroads made by blacks and women during World War II, inroads that should have made these groups valuable postwar labor allies. The section also details the white male and corporate expectation of returning to "normal" at the war's end. Argues Lipsitz, ". . . corporations would not long abide the activism so successful from 40-45." Slightly less coherent in this section is the author's use of Hank Williams and Marilyn Monroe as analogies/metaphors of labor's struggle.

The second section examines the use of the strike in the "reconversion" period. "More strikes took place in the twelve months after V-J Day than in any comparable period in American History . . . rank and file workers served notice that they would continue their wartime fight for increased control over pace, nature and compensations of work while resisting corporate efforts to further control and contain them" (p. 99). The potential coalition

of laborers returning from war, with the "new" labor force, could have been the catalyst for real gain.

In section three Lipsitz explores the relationship between national politics, corporations, labor, and the anticommunist agenda from 1947-1950. Here Lipsitz makes one of *Rainbow At Midnight's* most interesting and perceptive observations. Though corporate leaders went to great lengths to associate unionism with communism, for the rank-and-file it was the communist "affirmation" of "militancy as a part of working class identity" and not the "choice between the abstractions of capitalism and communism" that proved appealing (pp. 200-291). The final section of *Rainbow At Midnight* explores the efforts of corporate American society to, once again, gain control over labor. Here Lipsitz laments the labor movement's failure to capitalize on the progress gained during the 1940s.

Rainbow At Midnight is a well-written attempt to define and describe the gains made by labor activism in the 1940s. The book examines why that activism failed to realize its full potential in the face of corporate control and cultural conformity. Lipsitz suggests that this failure had profound implications for the 1980s. Although the book does not resolve the problems of organized labor, it does offer insight into an important chapter in labor history.

Sean C. Madden, *California University of Pennsylvania*

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