

BOOK REVIEWS

*K*enneth Wolensky with George M. Leader. *The Life of Pennsylvania Governor George M. Leader: Challenging Complacency* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011). Pp. 189. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth \$60.

As an urban historian I hesitated to review a book about the son of a Pennsylvania Dutch chicken farmer. George M. Leader was born in rural York County, and remained rooted there until his recent death at the age of ninety-five. For several reasons, however, I consented. First, my parents spent the final five years of their lives at Country Meadows of South Hills (Pittsburgh), a Leader-owned and -managed continuing care retirement community. Second, George Leader was not only governor of Pennsylvania during my college years at Ursinus College, but was also governor during the heyday of urban renewal in both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Embedded in a Germanic American farming culture, Leader governed Pennsylvania during an epic liberal and transformational era in urban Pennsylvania. I was curious.

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The facts presented in this book substantiate that despite his rural background, including his own early career as a chicken farmer, Leader possessed deep moderate-to-liberal values as a staunch progressive committed, in a Rooseveltian sense, to asserting the need for bold government action on behalf of the weak and oppressed.

However, this is hardly an orthodox political biography. Instead it is a hybrid, part biography, part autobiography. Moreover, despite the subtitle, the book lacks any overarching, unifying theme other than underscoring Leader's Christian empathy, humaneness, and sense of mission. In truth, the book is an annotated transcript (replete with the interviewer's questions) of many separate interviews that Wolensky did over time with Leader, his wife, and other members of his family. If there is a thesis, it is that the words of the principal actor speak for themselves.

Therefore, for the most part Wolensky presents his interview transcripts in virgin—that is, unedited—form. Consequently, repetition is commonplace. Moreover, with the exception of a brief, six-page introduction, and a few short paragraphs fronting each chapter, Wolensky allows Leader and his family to tell the story sans any larger contextual framework or editorial gloss. Even so, the book does unveil or illuminate much about the life of Governor George M. Leader. The reader learns that Leader followed his farmer father, who served for one term in the state senate, into Pennsylvania politics. We learn, too, that in his initial foray into state politics, running, like his father, for a seat in the state legislature, the young “New Dealer” was smeared in the “McCarthyite” milieu of 1952 as a “dangerous communist” (43).

Elected governor in 1955, Leader governed as a progressive reformer introducing efficiency—and Christian compassion—into the state's medieval system of care for those mentally ill or intellectually challenged. As for addressing the widespread fear of spreading urban blight, the advent of deindustrialization, and the call for urban renewal, Leader prided himself on founding the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority (PIDA). Out of office, but never fully out of politics, Leader (aided by his family) pioneered in transforming care for the elderly from derogated privately run, individual nursing homes into what is now the modern “continuing care retirement communities.” His Christian humanitarianism was both entrepreneurial and eleemosynary, and extended beyond delivering elder-health and housing services to aiding Ghana, and into prison ministry.

What Wolensky has omitted from this short volume is a firm scaffolding or framework situating Leader strategically and systematically into the larger

social, economic, and political postwar arena—a world of deindustrialization, suburbanization, mass consumerism, race and gender strivings, the rise of midwestern and western corporate farming, and the emergence of Pennsylvania's notorious political "T," which pitted the state's two or three large urban agglomerations, east and west, against its large swaths of central and northern rural counties. Nevertheless, the book succeeds in its own way in highlighting Leader as a fascinating, exceptionally humanitarian and liberal Pennsylvania politician who, while lacking the political tenaciousness of a David Lawrence, deserves an honored place in the pantheon of Pennsylvania political leaders.

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David R. Contosta, ed. *This Far by Faith: Tradition and Change in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012). Pp. 408. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95.

At their worst, local histories of religious organizations can be obsessive in their fascination with minutiae of interest to nobody outside the particular congregation—in the popular sense of the word, they are lamentably parochial. The Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, though, offers a completely different set of opportunities and challenges. In fact, it is impossible to understand the state's religious history without understanding that denomination. Episcopalians (with Quakers) comprised a large proportion of Philadelphia's traditional ruling class. Episcopalians also contributed mightily to the region's cultural and architectural achievements, and built many of its educational and charitable institutions. The University of Pennsylvania itself has Anglican origins.

It is a pleasure, then, to read this impressive and accessible diocesan history. The book is organized in nine chronological chapters, each by an experienced and able scholar. One useful feature of the book is a series of "boxes" in each chapter, which allows for detailed accounts of illustrative individuals, cases, or documents. These focused studies give human faces to the broader narrative in the main text.

The book's geographical scope demands explanation, as the diocese has over time shifted its boundaries very substantially. Originally covering the