The Day of the Mugwump. By Lorin Peterson. (New York: Random House, 1961. $6.00.)

Twentieth-century cities in the United States have witnessed a continual succession of movements to "reform" urban government, the most recent of which is the post-World War II drive for governmental innovations to carry through urban "redevelopment." These movements have never found a satisfactory historian. Save for a few studies during the Progressive Era which were more concerned with assessing proposed policies than with understanding the "reform" movement, and a few books on particular cities or particular subjects like the National Municipal League, no works have appeared to analyze the course of municipal reform and to determine its roots, its direction and its accomplishments. Lorin Peterson's book, although often highly superficial, helps to fill this gap.

Peterson describes the activities of the group which he calls "mugwumps," those who pushed municipal reforms, especially since the 1930's, their techniques, such as municipal research bureaus, their organizations, such as citizens leagues, and their political parties. Most of the book, however, is devoted to a city-by-city description in urban government in twenty major cities, including Pittsburgh, the successes and failures of "reform movements," of innovations such as city manager government, of plans for urban redevelopment. He stresses particularly that the first wave of "mugwump" activity, which emphasized more efficient and honest government, has now given way to a second concerned with urban reorganization and redevelopment. In his concluding chapter he gives his views as to the kinds of leadership the "mugwumps" must exercise in this second stage, and the political coalitions, especially the support of labor and Negro groups, which they must form to achieve success.

The Day of the Mugwump, however, sees municipal reform too much through the eyes of reformers themselves. Peterson views the political struggle as one between honest, efficient, and rational government in the "public interest" on the one hand, and those who would pervert that government to their own selfish ends on the other. It is a black-and-white, right-and-wrong statement of the issues involved. This may well be satisfactory rhetoric for rallying support for reformers, but it is completely inadequate for the historian who wants to understand how and why changes took place in urban government. For reformers were a particular group of people, with particular con-
ceptions about what was wrong in the city and what should be done about it. Their views were not shared by all. The story of urban reform is primarily one of the ways in which particular groups of people came to exercise political power and were, therefore, able to make their particular views prevail.

Mr. Peterson intimates that the “mugwumps” he describes represent the urban “middle class.” For this view he draws heavily on current theory concerning municipal reformers in the Progressive Era, especially the work of George Mowry on California “Progressives.” Yet this is slim and highly questionable evidence. Most available data about urban reform would indicate that the drive behind it came from the upper 10-15% of the population, and perhaps from even a smaller group. It is not without significance that almost 65% of 750 reformers in the Progressive Era were members of the top élite listed in the Social Register and the Blue Book, and that the sustained redevelopment effort in Pittsburgh has come primarily from the persistent cohesion of top-level groups of business and professional leaders in the Allegheny Conference for Community Development.

This book points up once again that the major weakness in our understanding of urban history is our extremely limited knowledge of urban social and political structure. We need to know more precisely the variety of groups which make up the city, of the relationships in which they stand toward each other, and of the precise nature of the inequalities in the distribution of urban political power. For it is from such circumstances that competing conceptions of “right” public policy arise and that some rather than others succeed in translating their views into public action. Mr. Peterson’s book, by its very nature, implicitly draws attention to these central problems, but does not attempt to cope with them.

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The author of most of the contents of this book was the Rev.