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Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922 and The Nonpartisan League, 1915-22: An Annotated Bibliography

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Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922. By Robert L. Morlan. Introduction by Larry Remele. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985. Reprint (1955). Illustrations, bibliography, index. xxii+414 pp. \$10.95.

The Nonpartisan League, 1915–22: An Annotated Bibliography. Compiled by Patrick K. Coleman and Charles R. Lamb. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985. Photographs, illustrations, index. ix+86 pp. \$12.95.

The Nonpartisan League was a post-Populist movement of farmers that arose in North Dakota in 1915 and rapidly spread throughout the Upper Midwest. Within a few years the League won primary elections against candidates of the established parties and gained control of the North Dakota government. Massive numbers of North Dakota farmers voted to bring in the League and its radical platform. The goal of the League was to alleviate the economic suffering of North Dakota farmers caused by outside forces over which they had no control, and to that end it sponsored a program of progressive legislation that included the establishment of state-owned industries—the most successful of which were a state mill and elevator and a state bank that are still in existence. Although the League lasted only seven years in its original incarnation, its political legacy in North Dakota and neighboring states exists to this day.

The best-known and most widely read book on the Nonpartisan League, Robert L. Morlan's *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922*, is now available in a

reprint edition. Originally published in 1955, it was the first complete historical treatment of the League, and although challenged on many fronts by more recent scholarship, it remains the standard with which all other scholarship on the League must begin. As Larry Remele points out in his informative introduction, Morlan's book has become almost a folk history of the League. More than most scholarly works, *Political Prairie Fire* influenced the general public: the oral tradition of the League so closely parallels the story told by Morlan that few are sure which came first.

Many points in Morlan's book have been supplemented or revised since its publication in 1955. Perhaps most hotly disputed is his contention that the League sprang full-blown from the imagination of its first president, Arthur C. Townley. No one insisted more upon this point than the elusive Townley himself, whom Morlan interviewed before Townley's death in 1959. Morlan gives little credit to the cultural and political milieu of the farmers from which the League drew its sustenance. Much recent scholarship emphasizes the existence of a social and political community prior to the birth of the League. Remele's introduction assays this and other research that has been done in the thirty years since Morlan's book first appeared.

Future scholars of the League will be greatly aided by *The Nonpartisan League, 1915–22: An Annotated Bibliography*, compiled by Patrick K. Coleman and Charles R. Lamb. This fine bibliography lists manuscript collections, books, articles, and unpublished monographs on the League in North Dakota and other states. It also touches on the legacy of the League for subsequent protest movements. However, most scholars would appreciate citations of the location of the hard-to-find books and unpublished manuscripts. The publication of this bibliography will make future research on the League that much easier.

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