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Review of Prohibition in Kansas: A History

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BOOK REVIEWS

Prohibition in Kansas: A History. By Robert Smith Bader. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. Illustrations, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 322 pp. \$19.95.

Owner of the prohibition longevity record, Kansas has a history that in large part focuses on the suppression of intoxicating beverages. Prohibition divided Kansans longer and deeper than any other issue, and none is better to explain the social texture and personality of the state. Eschewing that opportunity, historians have tended to minimize its importance and treat it in a cursory fashion. This book is the first scholarly and comprehensive analysis of prohibition from inception to demise in the purportedly driest state in America. The examination of Kansas in a broad context also adds a dimension to prohibition as a national phenomenon.

Reflecting revisionist trends, the author is sympathetic toward prohibitionists and their notion of reform. They are ubiquitous in the narrative, which has incisive sections on temperance organizations, philosophy, and strategy, and perceptive individual profiles. Misconceptions about the prohibitionists are

expunged, and this includes a convincing rehabilitation of Carry A. Nation as intelligent, reflective, and compassionate. The temperance vision did not encompass all Kansans, but was basically confined to rural, native stock of evangelical religious persuasion, particularly women who combined idealism and practicality. A key feature of the book is a wide and instructive view of the role and influence of women in behalf of temperance and the relationship of that issue to those of gender.

Kansas had two prohibition cycles with similar stages. Diffused and sporadic in their early efforts, temperance forces gained the necessary unity, experience, and converts to attach a prohibitory amendment to the state constitution in an 1880 referendum. After an initial phase of enforcement that could be termed fairly successful, prohibition sentiment waned sufficiently by the 1890s that the saloon reappeared in Kansas. The book is exemplary on this cycle, with heavy use of primary sources, a profusion of insights, and cogent interpretation.

The second cycle began with the progressive reconsecration of prohibition that peaked during the Eighteenth Amendment and declined until a new generation of Kansas voters

repealed prohibition in 1948. The book is less satisfactory on this cycle, especially in the selectivity of evidence and arguments to buttress dry claims and the efficacy of prohibition.

Well written, logically organized, and thoroughly researched, this book is heavily weighted toward Kansas dries and their version of prohibition. This is one of its strengths, but also its liability—the sins of prohibitionists are too easily forgiven and their justifications too readily accepted. Despite this nagging, the book is pivotal to Kansas history.

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