Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930.
By George C. Wright. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985. Pp. xii, 302. Notes, tables, maps, selected bibliography, index. $27.50.)

The black experience, according to George C. Wright, was different in Louisville from what Afro-Americans experienced in other southern cities. Host to a "polite form of racism" between the end of the Civil War and the Great Depression, Louisville offered its black community little harsh treatment and no lynchings during a period in which most blacks in the urban South were the object of intimidation and violence. Louisville's blacks also "consistently enjoyed and exercised an oft-contested but never effectively retracted enfranchisement" (cover). The black vote, however, did not contribute to substantial political leverage, and there were no significant improvements in the quality of the civil rights of blacks. Paternalism on the part of whites "carried over from antebellum days in Louisville" (cover), and whites helped blacks establish schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Wright agrees with Howard Rabinowitz that such activities made the maintenance of strict segregation easier, and that blacks generally accepted such assistance with the understanding that they would refrain from advocating civil and social equality. He also develops the notion, probably best expressed by Kenneth Kusmer, that blacks made the most of their position on their own, and that through their own efforts they created a "diversity and richness of life" in their community (p. 10).

In general, Wright carries out his stated purpose most effectively. His study, which deals with a southern border city, adds much to the growing body of historical literature on the black urban experience. The author has consulted a variety of primary and secondary materials (although unaccountably not the federal population schedules) in the pursuit of his goal, a narrative of the means whereby Louisville blacks came to grips with second-class status. The reader will find some unique contributions to the literature here. Especially valuable are Wright's explorations of education and politics. Also his accounts of interracial organizations in the 1920s are most interesting.

A few matters, however, are left either untouched or superficially treated. The work begins with the end of the Civil War, although frequent reference is made to the pre-1865 legacy of paternalism. An introductory chapter on antebellum Louisville would have been helpful. The study also contains little on the matter of occupational mobility—for example, to compare the experiences of black and white newcomers—and does not attempt to
show the development of residential segregation via such devices as an index of dissimilarity. Perhaps the author, moreover, could have treated the subjects raised in chapters ten and twelve (the NAACP and interracial organizations of the 1920s) in one chapter, thus more coherently analyzing black responses to white racism. It should be added that some illustrations would have helped, and that the four maps provided in the book are not very useful.

Nevertheless, this is a well-researched and ably written piece, and it is an important addition to the history of black Americans.

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Because, in part, of the influence of progressives such as Robert M. La Follette, Sr., in not only shaping but interpreting the development of Wisconsin's history, the late nineteenth century in that state has often been viewed as a prelude, a time of darkness before the coming of the light, a time of corruption and self-indulgence before the dawn of an era of political honesty and public-spirited service. In his extensive history of Wisconsin from 1873 to 1893, Robert C. Nesbit establishes the importance of this period in its own right and offers a more balanced analysis of its dynamic features. It was, he argues, a critical period during which the state moved from an “extractive frontier economy” to a “mainly urban-centered economy operating on the leading edge of contemporary industrial technology” (p. v), and during which settlement patterns changed dramatically as communities sprung up in relatively unpopulated areas of the state and people gravitated toward burgeoning towns and cities. It was also a period in which politics and governmental structures began to respond, sometimes quite effectively, to a variety of new challenges.

By organizing the book into three sections entitled “The Economy,” “Communities,” and “Politics and Government,” Nesbit has created a framework which makes the history of this complex period more accessible. Although the book's final section provides a very interesting vantage point from which to assess the Progressive Era which was to follow, it is the shortest of the