

REVIEWS

Butler University A Sesquicentennial History

By George M. Waller

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Pp. xvi, 506. Illustrations, appendix, select bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Not infrequently a university, preparing to celebrate a major institutional anniversary, calls upon one of its veteran historians or recently retired presidents to write an official record of its past. Such was the case with this book. George Macgregor (“Mac”) Waller was a much-honored (e.g., Phi Beta Kappa state president, Fulbright Professor, Sagamore of the Wabash, Butler Medal recipient), and long-serving (1954-1990) professor at Butler, where he specialized in colonial American history. This history of Butler was his retirement project, which he had essentially completed by the time of his death in 2003. His widow Martha, Butler historian Paul Hanson, Butler librarian Sally Childs-Helton, and Indiana University Press editor Roberta Diehl transformed and abridged the manuscript into the book. The complete original manuscript, with footnotes, is available in

the Special Collections of the Butler University Irvin Library.

Butler University has always been located in Indianapolis, albeit on three campuses (the inner-city College Avenue site, 1855-1875; the Irvington campus, 1875-1928; and the current Fairview locale on the White River), has historically been associated with the Disciples of Christ denomination—but never in an official manner—and has operated by its present name since 1875 (for its first twenty years the institution was known as North Western Christian University). Compared to other denominational liberal arts colleges of nineteenth-century origin, Butler’s history has been characterized by greater-than-normal levels of trustee micro-management, fraternity and sorority housing arrangements (residence halls did not appear until the 1950s), early course offerings in Bib-

lical literature, and a big-time athletic program with an autonomous governance structure (the latter was a major factor in the accreditation crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s).

Waller has written an able, definitive, and comprehensive history. But what generally is a strength at times becomes a weakness—as, for example, when the author devotes twelve pages to the recommendations of a late twentieth-century planning commission. His research is thorough, his prose is clear, and his treatment is evenhanded—generally sympathetic although not uncritical. Heroes (among them trustee and institutional namesake Ovid Butler, trustee Hilton V. Brown, and President M. O. Ross) and villains (e.g., President Walter Scott Ahearn) exist but do not dominate the narrative. The author places the Butler story in the larger context of the developments in Indianapolis, American higher education, and the Disciples of Christ denomination. Especially noteworthy is his account of the defensive reaction of denomination founder Alexander Campbell (who had opened Bethany College in Virginia/West Virginia in 1840) to the beginning of the Indianapolis institution as a separate—and presumably

competing—Disciples college. We also see how the Columbus, Indiana, Disciples church (especially through the Irwin, Miller, and Sweeney families) played a large role over multiple generations in financing and governing the university. Waller says little directly about the declining twentieth-century influence of the Disciples in the governance of the college or about the movement of the institution in a secular direction.

For the first time in its history, Butler now possesses a fully developed published record of its past. Preceding efforts of note include Thomas Fields's 1928 Butler M.A. thesis on the first two campuses, John Kondelik's 1993 University of Michigan Ph.D. dissertation, "Butler University and the Dream of Distinction," and Henry K. Shaw's September, 1962 *Indiana Magazine of History* article, "The Founding of Butler University, 1847-1855."

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