

Book Reviews

Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier Statesman. Volume II, From the Civil War to the White House, 1865-1888. By Harry J. Sievers. (New York: University Publishers, Inc., 1959. Pp. xxi, 502. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$6.00.)

To judge a man's character or to evaluate his contributions to his fellow man on the basis of a few personal traits and an equally few events selected from a long and active life is at best presumptuous. But, through the medium of history texts, this type of judgement too often forms the essence of Benjamin Harrison in the minds of students in survey courses in American history. Harrison, if remembered at all, may be remembered as a president (and who usually hears he was anything but a president) who had "some political experience," or who has the dubious honor of being "one of the more notable presidential nonentities." Or, as just the grandson of William Henry, he has been described as "colorless in personality, cold in manner, and singularly aloof."

In this second volume of a proposed three-volume biography, Father Sievers' meticulous research has produced a most readable and probably definitive account of an energetic, warm, and human Harrison who was more than Indiana's only president. One who participated actively in state and national politics for more than two decades, including a term as United States senator, and, who for the same period was leader of his states' Republican party, certainly had "some political experience." One who was the financial fount for more dependent relatives than any one person should have, and who, for over forty years, was an indefatigable leader in his church must have been more than colorless, cold, and aloof. One whose integrity was unimpeached and who was known far beyond the limits of his state as a skillful prosecutor and defense attorney should escape the singular appellation of nonentity. These facts and more are revealed by Father Sievers as he exhumes this Hoosier statesman from his traditional and rather ignominious historical tomb.

The fact that we see possibly too little of Harrison's non-public life, and the fact that we are never quite certain why Senator Morton's shadow engulfed Harrison's political aspirations for twelve years may disturb some readers. The chapter, "The Harrison Horror," concerned with a body snatching episode in Ohio, though a part of the Harrison story, may appear to be somewhat extraneous. It might also be suspected that the author is captivated by his subject and fails to record Harrison's unfavorable features, which are popularly expected in any person engaged in a public career—but possibly there were none.

The revelations in the second volume cause one to suspect that the final volume, may it not be too long in creation, will prove that Harrison's administration was notable for more than just the wiring of the executive mansion for electricity.

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