

Joseph L. Bristow: Kansas Progressive. By A. Bower Sageser. (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1968. Pp. 197. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$6.50.)

Joseph L. Bristow, the son of an impoverished preacher and farmer, worked his way through college, secured legal training, and bought part ownership in a Kansas newspaper. He made his home in Salina, used his paper to win recognition, and began his search for public office. Steadfastly Republican, he joined William Allen White in denouncing Populists and Democrats and singing the praises of William McKinley. In the scramble for patronage that followed the Republican victory, Bristow was named fourth assistant postmaster general. He was scrupulously honest, extremely hardworking, and highly efficient. When scandals rocked the postal department during the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, Bristow won national prominence as a reformer because he compiled the evidence which resulted in the indictment of highly placed Republicans. President Roosevelt accepted his resignation after party pressure made Bristow a liability. Roosevelt quieted critics by asking him to make a study for the Panama Canal Commission.

Back in Kansas in 1906—after almost ten years in Washington—Bristow sought election to the United States Senate and won the support of the Republicans who had enjoyed his past favors, shared in the patronage, or were impressed with his record in the post office. He was elected in 1908 and immediately identified himself with the Robert M. La Follette group of progressives. How and why he made the transition from McKinleyite to progressive is unclear.

In 1912 he supported La Follette's bid for the presidential nomination, reluctantly turned to Roosevelt after La Follette's debacle, and even more reluctantly wore the Bull Moose label. In the wake of Roosevelt's defeat, Bristow refused to cooperate with White, when the Emporia editor tried to build a Progressive party in Kansas. Caught between party regulars who resented his endorsement of Roosevelt and determined progressives who felt that he had betrayed them, Bristow lost his bid for renomination.

But, because he campaigned vigorously for the Republican slate, he was appointed to the Kansas Public Utility Commission. Although Bristow planned to use the position only to keep in the public eye until the next senatorial contest, his energy, experience, and efficiency improved the agency. In 1918 he was soundly defeated in the party's senatorial primary. Shortly thereafter, he retired from public life and from Kansas, returned to a plantation in Virginia which he had bought during his Senate days, and became a gentleman farmer and suburban land developer.

Bristow was as shallow as a saucer. He was honest, efficient, provincial, and free of visible ideological taint. He was a self-righteous moralist who defined his political opponents as immoral and wrongheaded and conceived of himself as ethical and pragmatic. His progressivism was narrowly political,

and it expanded only so long as he was associated with men of greater vision. Sageser would probably dissent from so harsh a judgment, but the reader of his book is inexorably driven to this conclusion.

This is a tidy work about a tidy man. Bristow does not seem to have been especially significant, and Sageser has done a good job of setting him in perspective.

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