Without question, the author accomplishes what he set out to do. This is the definitive study of the critics' opinions of Masters' voluminous writings. Flanagan's prose is clear, crisp, and candid. He has great empathy for Masters, but his intimate feelings do not hamper his objectivity. Unfavorable, as well as favorable, criticism is examined thoroughly. For example, in the chapter discussing fiction Flanagan states: "On the balance it must be admitted that Masters did not write distinguished fiction" (p. 106). This same candor about what the critics wrote is displayed in every chapter of the book. And by reading what the critics had to say one gains much knowledge about Masters and the literary climate that prevailed in the United States prior to World War II. As a social critic, Masters had much to say about life. Flanagan's informative book caused this reviewer to reread the Spoon River Anthology in its entirety. Although Flanagan found many areas of agreement among the critics, his book points out that literary criticism is not an exact science.

This book will be of interest to instructors who teach literary criticism and to students who are interested in their midwestern heritage.

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The elections are those of 1800, 1836, 1860, 1896, and 1936. The authors: five professional historians—Merrill D. Peterson, Joel H. Silbey, Don E. Fehrenbacher, Gilbert C. Fite, and Donald R. McCoy—each dealing with a year.

It is McCoy's judgment (p. 56) that 1836 and 1896 were "on a lower level of significance" than 1800, 1860, and 1936. What about 1796? 1856? Fehrenbacher rejects them (p. 34) as choices for major cruciality because each was "reversed four years later." 1832? Silbey points out that half the states then still had "essentially one-party systems" (p. 25), where-
as in 1836 “the Democrats dramatically struck out in new directions with far-reaching consequences for the future course of American politics” (p. 16).

Peterson's treatment of 1800 strikes this reviewer as the least complex. Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration in 1801 “completed the first democratic transfer of power in the nation’s history” (p. 1). Jefferson “adhered to what he came to call his ‘experiment’ in unmolested freedom of discussion . . . . The principle was riveted on Jefferson’s successors. And this was the critical, the enduring, importance of the election of 1800” (p. 13).

Addressing himself to a more complicated topic, Fehrenbacher does more ranging—justifiably, in this reviewer’s opinion. He emphasizes that 1860 “was one of a number of elections that may be labeled crucial but the only one that proved to be catastrophic” (p. 30). Fehrenbacher cites a definition of “crucial” (“involving a final and supreme decision”) and comments: “The final decision may not be the truly effective one” (p. 37). He contrasts 1844 with 1860, terms the former “a real forking-point,” and even opines that the 1860 election “may be viewed as a terminal symptom” (p. 38). Nevertheless, the candidates, atmosphere, and mechanics of politics in 1860-1861 did indeed make the election crucial.

In 1896, Fite reminds us, William Jennings Bryan showed the “direct relationship between economic and political power” (p. 50) more clearly than any candidate before him. Fite sees the nominees’ images as especially consequential: “Thus McKinley and the gold standard became the symbols of Americanism, nationalism, patriotism, and social stability” (p. 53). McCoy adds that 1896 marked the start of “a sixteen-year period of strong [Republican] control” (p. 56).

McCoy depicts 1936 as demonstrating that big government was “here to stay.” The election “perpetuated not only the two-party system but also the concept of deciding national differences at the polls”; the voters preferred “scattered remedies and reforms” to risking “a thorough-going change of the system.” True, much of what 1936 developed “had come together in 1932.” Yet now it was evident that “the shift . . . was not just ‘a sometime thing’” (p. 72).

Other candidates for consideration in a list of crucial elections are those of 1789 (mentioned by Fehrenbacher),
1828, 1832, 1844, 1900, 1912, 1920, and 1932. Strong cases can be made for at least three of them. At the same time, most of the conclusions reached by the five scholars command respect. Keys to the logic of what is crucial are just such words and phrases as “defining,” “shaping,” “far-reaching,” “enduring,” “decades to come,” and “here to stay.”

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Holman Hamilton


Professor La Forte has taken progressive Republicans in Kansas as his theme. These Republicans emerged in the “boss-busting” party factionalism at the turn of the century, dominated state Republicanism for a time, and then abdicated party control as they followed Theodore Roosevelt into the Bull Moose episode, after which they made their “trip back” to party regularity, although no longer as leaders. La Forte has used—with discretion, objectivity, irony, and sophistication—a range of documentary collections for local and state figures and for national personalities. William Allen White, for example, plays a large role in the narrative, but his recollections as recorded in his “highly imaginative autobiography” do not determine the author’s analyses.

For historians, political progressivism has not appeared to be as logical, as consistent, or as clearly defined as it did to those who participated in it and who provided the sources from which the scholar derives his narrative and draws his interpretations. Students of progressivism at the state level have produced one set of generalizations, while interpreters of progressivism at the national level have produced other not entirely harmonious ones. Setting up one set of these generalizations and knocking it down with “facts” has been a professional pastime to some extent, and La Forte engages in it. He finds, for example, that Kansas progressive Republicans were akin to the prototype established by George E. Mowry, but interestingly enough he finds that regular Republicans and Democratic party leaders in Kansas also fit the prototype. Unlike Hoyt L. Warner’s urban findings in