

# Local Devolutions

by Molly Fleming

## Rockford: 1900-World War I

by Eric A. Johnson

Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia;  
128 pp., \$19.99



Most Rockfordians are familiar with the garishly modern Winnebago County Courthouse at 400 West Main Street, which is easily recognized by its filthy cement exterior and offensive “contemporary” style. It was not that much better at the turn of the 20th century, as far as I knew, until I received a copy of Eric A. Johnson’s *Rockford: 1900-World War I*. A pictorial history, the book displays what Rockford was before developers ruined some of her most prized landmarks, theaters, and public houses. (Among our most impressive buildings was the old court house, designed by Henry L. Gay in French-Venetian-American style between 1876 and 1878.)

Although it is not the angle Johnson himself took when compiling the postcards and writing the bylines, what Rockford locals once had was a beautiful and classic downtown with elegant residential neighborhoods to match—and now most of that is gone. Although the renovation of the Coronado Theater, the grandeur of Memorial Hall, and great preservation work done by various companies are all things that locals should be proud of, *Rockford: 1900-World War I* displays an entirely different city. The book offers 128 pages of beautifully preserved postcards that do not read “Just Saying Hi From Rockford, Ill.” and are accompanied by informative descriptions that help the reader to identify modern neighborhoods and how they looked in the city’s heyday. One of the most striking contrasts is presented by the old Rockford College campus, which was once host to predominantly Romanesque architecture and graced by the elegant Colonial-style Middle Hall, built in 1852. Today, the college (which was moved to a new campus in the early 1960’s) looks rather like a collection of ill-shaped cardboard boxes.

Additional eye-openers are the scenes of a bustling community at the Shumway Market, back in 1915. One postcard, donated by Midway Village and Museum Center, portrays hundreds of people

shopping and perusing the marketplace on a sunny afternoon. Today, the weekend farmers’ markets offer nothing like the scenes in this book. As Johnson pointed out to me in an interview, however, the times have changed. “Most circumstances are beyond our control. Life has changed and Rockford culture has changed.” Nevertheless, the author (an Ohio resident) appeared to be fairly positive about the city and its growth. “I’m not a native to Rockford,” he said. “My wife is the one who introduced me to [the city]. I have brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and friends there. I became acquainted with Rockford through my wife. It’s where I came of age, and it was an exciting time in my life. I think I appreciated things that the average Rockfordian overlooks day-in, day-out. [The book is] my love-gift to the Rockford community.” Perhaps it takes a nonnative to step back and see the city through new eyes and to show the community the stark contrast between past grandeur and present disarray.

*Rockford: 1900-World War I* is a great addition to the few but important books published about Rockford. When I asked him why he chose to do a pictorial history, Johnson commented, “Written histories have been done. A lot more comprehensive histories have been done. These postcards are very beautiful and, to use a cliché, a picture is worth a thousand words. I tried to tell the interesting tidbits with these scenes that strike me as the average person’s view of the important people, institutions, and public areas.”

And so his book is a must-have for any local enthusiast. The most interesting cards are those that have messages etched across them, giving the reader insight into communications by Rockford’s locals almost a hundred years ago. In the chapter “Three Cheers for Rockford High School,” there is a photo of the football team with an arrow drawn to point at a sullen looking youth and the words “This is me. Ha! Ha!” Although the humor by George “Kitty” Kitteringham is completely lost on me (though his scrawny and rather hen-pecked appearance is amusing), the handwriting adds a comforting dimension.

There is also interesting information about Camp Grant, the old Harlem Park, Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to Rockford, and the theaters that hosted the likes of Oscar Wilde, Sammy Davis, Jr., Bob Hope, and Susan B. Anthony. Now Rockford pulls in Cher and Kenny Chesney, with

Weird Al Yankovic as the closest thing to a vaudeville show. I could have lived a happy life without ever seeing Susan B. or Sammy, but these people were once “stars” who provided the city with a connection to the outside world. This past spring, Aretha Franklin was slated to play at the recently renovated Coronado Theater but turned the gig down, citing the elegant new (if not a little over the top) venue as “a dump.” Seventy-five years ago, she would have jumped at the chance to play the same city that had been graced by so many popular figures in the cultural world.

Johnson’s book should be enlightening to the locals of all the other overdeveloped, undermanaged cities in America.

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## From Cincinnatus to Caesar

by J.O. Tate

### From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition

by Clyde N. Wilson

Columbia, SC: The Foundation for American Education; 343 pp., \$24.95



Dr. Clyde Wilson’s new gathering will be of particular interest to readers of this journal, as some parts of it have appeared in these pages and as he has for years maintained a special relationship with *Chronicles*. Yet I hasten to add that the compelling quality of these essays speaks broadly to the most vital issues of our national identity and history and to the self-understanding of Americans as expressed in our politics—and, even more, to the self-awareness of Americans that cannot, or should not, be expressed in politics.

Written from 1969 to 2001, these articles, essays, reviews, and lesser pieces express a consistent, surprising, and productive point of view. They are consistent not only in the continuity of the author’s identity but, more importantly, in his speaking from principle; surprising in their applicability to the contemporary era. And they are productive because, no matter the provocation, Wilson’s counsels are not of despair. Clyde Wilson

knows too well that optimism and pessimism, though not determinative, are in some way self-fulfilling prophecies. That "Death by Melancholy" once identified by Walter Sullivan, the pessimism that is rooted in the blessing and curse of knowledge, can only be averted finally by the maintenance of faith, however distressed such faith may be. Wilson keeps the faith, no matter what.

The base of Clyde Wilson's knowledge (though by no means its limit) is as an historian and an Americanist; his center is the South. A professor of history at the University of South Carolina, he is the editor of the 28-volume edition of *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, as well as the editor and author of other books. He has for more than three decades articulated a perspective that, though unique, is not unrelated to those of such notables as Richard M. Weaver, James Burnham, Russell Kirk, M.E. Bradford, Forrest McDonald, and Samuel Francis, who are subjects of various of his pieces.

The point of view that Wilson upholds with informed knowledge and articulated reason is the one he identifies as Jeffersonian and we may call localist, particularist, democratic, and republican. His point is made when we understand that the term *federalism* has come to mean the opposite of its historical denotation and that *democrat* and *republican* signify something more—and other—than the names, respectively, of self-serving factional elites; or more and other than euphemisms for pandering demagogues, on the one hand, or pandering plutocrats, on the other. Alternatively, we might say that his point is made when we begin to understand the Constitution and our relation to it, and how it has become the arcane totem of various witch doctors, such as those on the Supreme Court who recently found constitutional sanction for affirmative action and sodomy. Interpretation of the Constitution has become so uncannily attuned to the whining of identity groups that it is no wonder that nominations to the Supreme Court have been grossly politicized. But that is just the point: The mystification of the Constitution has been a necessary part of our slide into abstract politics for a long time. Yet if we as citizens or as subjects cannot even read our own Constitution, that has not deterred Clyde Wilson from engaging it on its own grounds.

Having been instructed for years in the national journals and the better newspapers that ours is "a proposition nation,"

we might be shocked (if we did not know better) to discover that it is no such thing. And the reiteration of other suppressed truths might be shocking as well. My favorite passage is this one:

It would astound our politicians today to learn that at the time of the Founders and even long after, people held public office for the honor and that in most cases, rather than filling their own snouts at the public trough . . . they actually made a sacrifice of their private interests to serve in public office. The Constitution presupposed an aristocratic rather than a bourgeois class of office holders and aspirants . . . who would always be capable of independent judgment. That is, the operation of the Constitution rested in part on something that has ceased to exist.

Yet this does not necessarily mean that the Constitution can never again rest on a class of independent minds uncorrupted by bribery and unclouded by ideological obsession. To achieve such a deliverance from the present thralldom, Americans must return to electing to office Jeffersonian "natural aristocrats" rather than the overly familiar rascals and mountebanks of more recent times. If I have understood him, Wilson still believes that a return to a properly understood federalism and a concomitant revival of states' rights could restore not only the balance of government but even the balance between the public and the private realms. And again, if I have understood him, Wilson has indicated that the Republican Party has proved to be the treacherous instrument for pursuing any such restoration and regeneration of a healthy body politic.

There is much more to be considered and absorbed from this book. How refreshing it is to see Alexander Hamilton dispatched with such panache—and James Madison, as well. The opposite approach to John Taylor, George Mason, Nathaniel Macon, and St. George Tucker is most enlightening and useful in creating or reasserting a usable past that actually aims at ameliorating contemporary problems, rather than exacerbating them further.

Upon due consideration, I think that *From Union to Empire* is a book that any American could read with profit and pleasure. And I see it as the ideal gift for any

young person perplexed by what the late Andrew Lytle called "the present confusion." Graced with informed perspective, humor, and surprising conclusions, these essays have convinced me that what this country needs is less of Woodrow, and more of Clyde, Wilson.

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## Mexifornicating the Californicated

by Roger D. McGrath

**Mexifornia: A State of Becoming**

by Victor Davis Hanson

San Francisco: Encounter Books;

150 pp., \$24.95



Victor Davis Hanson, a professor of classics at California State University, Fresno, writes often and writes well. I have two of his books on ancient Greece. He is the only author who has ever explained to me how difficult it was to wreak permanent agricultural devastation on a typical Greek city-state: Pulling out grape vines is exhausting, and chopping down mature olive trees is backbreaking—if not an exercise in futility—so hard is the wood. Hoplite armies did not have the time or energy for such tasks. Hanson understands these things because he is, in addition to being a professor, a farmer. His own fields, near the San Joaquin Valley town of Selma, are now regularly damaged by illegal aliens from Mexico. The Mexican illegals, says Hanson in *Mexifornia*, have careened off the road and plowed through his fences, crops, and trees, costing him thousands of dollars. They have partied in his fields and left debris scattered far and wide. They have stolen his farm tools and equipment. They have pilfered the contents of his roadside mailbox. They have even broken into his house. Others have asked if they could rent his barn or an outbuilding as a "dormitory" for farm workers. Hanson has learned that the rentals are invariably put to another use—the production of methamphetamine.

Illegal aliens use his rural road as the county dump. Once a month, Hanson