

Sounds like a Reagan ad, and not a very good one at that.

—Michael Hiestand

Petroleum Politics and the Texas Railroad Commission. David F. Prindle. University of Texas Press, \$14.95. A lively book about an obscure state regulatory body that, through an accident of geology and jurisdiction, wields enormous power in determining how oil and gas are produced and sold in this country. Prindle delights in pointing out the cozy relationship between the Texas Railroad Commission and the industries it regulates.

The Railroad Commission, besides having a misnomer for a name, is an odd regulatory bird because its members are elected in an at-large statewide contest. Beginning in the 1930s, the Commission exercised a distinct preference for oil and gas producers over consumers, but within that bias it preferred local, risk-taking independents to the major companies that came from out-of-state. This is important because the Commission has often served as referee between the majors and the independents on such issues as production levels, ownership rights, and market access.

Prindle, who writes with a fine ability to make technical and economic issues interesting, is appalled by the free-market rhetoric so often mouthed by producers in recent years. He documents 50 years of efforts by producers to maintain a web of price-support regulations that benefited them. "Debate over government regulation takes place in a twilight zone between outright propaganda and cherished myth," he writes, suggesting that members a bit more skeptical of industry might keep the Commission more balanced. (See *The Washington Monthly*, October 1980, for a first-person description by Democrat Jim Hightower of his nearly successful populist campaign for the Commission.)

—Pat Martin

Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign. Elizabeth

Drew. Simon & Schuster, \$14.95. The author's articles for the *Atlantic* in the late 1960s earned her a respected place in the history of journalism. She may have been the first writer to make the operations of government agencies like the FCC and the Army Corps of Engineers understandable and interesting to people who were neither civil servants nor political scientists. In the early 1970s her program on PBS showed her to be a skillful interviewer, and as a panelist on "Agronsky and Company," where excursions into the unpredictable are rare indeed, she is seldom rigid and almost always sensible.

During the early seventies she began reporting for *The New Yorker*, and her writing came under the influence of its great editor, William Shawn. Shawn tends to favor a style that leaves analysis to the inferential powers of the reader. Sometimes this kind of writing simply seems mindless. This is why Drew is called Nancy by those at *The New Yorker* who do not share Shawn's enthusiasm for her.

Shawn's preference for simply laying out all the facts works best when the subject is underpublicized (e.g., how Robert Moses got things done), or when the writers themselves have some sense of selectivity about what facts they will present (e.g., Calvin Trillin). Neither of those is the case with Elizabeth Drew. Much of the time she is working with the most familiar of events—Watergate, national elections—without the ability to distinguish between significant and insignificant details. Thus even in her best book, *Senator*, she helpfully informed her readers that Iowa was a rectangular state in the Midwest. (In lower levels of the publishing world this approach would lead to the suspicion that the writer was being paid by the word.)

There is less of Nancy in this book than in her two *Washington Journal* volumes—*Portrait of an Election* is much closer to *Senator* in its overall quality. She is

especially insightful in her understanding of how Reagan the political leader was shaped by Reagan's career as an actor. Still, those who yearn for Nancy will not be disappointed. Here is her description of a church that Carter visited during the campaign:

"The church itself, a rectangular building, seems fairly new, and has white walls, blue-and-red-glass windows, and pale wood panels on the stage."

—Charles Peters

The Road from Here: Liberalism and Realities in the 1980s. Paul Tsongas. Knopf, \$12.95. A neo-liberal manifesto by the junior senator from Massachusetts. Flawed but important and well worth reading.

Somoza and the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America. Bernard Diederich. Dutton, \$19.75.

Tribes on the Hill: An Investigation into the Rituals and Realities of an Endangered American Tribe—The Congress of the United States. J. McIver Weatherford. Rawson, Wade, \$13.95. The human mind can grasp some complex institutions; others are unknowable. You can get a handle on the AFL-CIO, Exxon, and the New York Yankees. Even the presidency is comprehensible if examined exhaustively enough. But some institutions simply defy any efforts to make them intelligible: the Saudi royal family, Tibetan Lamaism, and the Congress of the United States.

This barrenness of useful analysis is not for lack of effort. Journalists try their hands. Former members publish self-serving nostalgia. Political scientists bring to bear their "content analysis," "roll-call analysis," and "factor analysis" to reaffirm the same point that office-holding is delightful and eternal office-holding is eternally delightful. Sociologists have taken their cuts; so have psychologists. The one academic group that has been conspicuously absent is the anthropologists, who might have

been expected to make some interesting comparisons between hunting and gathering, and humping and blathering.

This book tries to do that. *Tribes on the Hill* is a product of the fundamental tenet of modern anthropology: the universality of function. Simply stated, this means that all societies have certain myths, rituals, and symbols in common but find different ways to express and manipulate them. If you accept that premise, the potlatch ceremony of the Chinook Indians of the Pacific Northwest differs little from a political fundraiser at the F Street Club, and the informal caucuses of House freshmen elected in a particular year can be likened to Kikuyu circumcision rites. After all, they perform essentially the same functions.

I don't know that I buy all of this, but the parallels contained here are so delightfully imaginative and so crisply erudite you find yourself going along with him for the fun of it.

Weatherford, who observed this baffling institution at close range as a staff aide to Senator John Glenn, concludes that congressional rituals have gotten totally out of hand and the ceremonies and incantations of our national legislature have come very close to defining what the institution is all about.

He and I part company here. Congress would be a far less engrossing place without its totems and kinship groups. We tried to divest the presidency of magical rites and found the result not to our liking. And, besides, if Congress had been demystified, Weatherford would not have wanted to write about it in the first place. In that case we would have been deprived of a clever and enchanting book by an academic who really knows how to write.

—Ross K. Baker

The Ultimate Resource. Julian L. Simon. Princeton, \$14.50.

Up the Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years. Sally Bedell Viking, \$13.95. Now that Fred

Silverman has been booted from NBC, this book isn't so relevant. But Silverman's career is important to any understanding of television in the 1970s. More than anyone else, he determined the content of the 22 hours of weekly prime-time TV. If you want the details—show-by-show—they are here.

So are the statistics, which grow no less amazing through repetition: Advertising rates for the most popular programs—such as *Three's Company*—are now up to \$200,000 a minute. Seventy-six million homes have television sets, and the average daily viewing per household is now six hours, 17 minutes. Americans spend an average of 2,000 hours a year watching the tube and less than 50 hours in "direct sexual involvement."

The book also contains a glossary of prime-time jargon. Wonder no more about the official definition of "jiggle." It's "a young female television personality running at top speed wearing little

underwear." Silverman excelled at creating jiggles, but he also did a few good things. *All in the Family*, for instance, wouldn't have made it on the air if he hadn't pushed it while at CBS.

—Joan Shaffer

Yellow Rain: A Journey Through the Terror of Chemical Warfare. Sterling Seagrave. M. Evans, \$11.95. If you're wondering how the U.S. first got the idea of stockpiling nerve gas and other weapons of chemical warfare, Seagrave provides an answer. It turns out that during the 1920s a World War I veteran named Amos Fries "virtually singlehandedly manipulated all the essential levers of power in government and private industry" to bring about the creation of a well-funded Chemical Warfare Service. While Europeans who survived mustard gas in the trenches sought to ban chemical warfare, Colonel Fries had a vision of "wars without battlefields."

This chronicle of the develop-

"Fresh and surprising and wonderful fun to read." —John Chancellor

Washington's cherry tree, Jackson's duels, Taft's bathtub, Johnson's vanity, Reagan's jelly beans —the foibles and fancies of all 39 of our Chief Executives fill this "delightful and amusing book by a scholar who carries his learning gracefully."

—Theodore H. White

\$14.95

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Paul F. Boller, Jr.

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