

Government Was the Solution

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

His Life and Times: An Encyclopedic View.

Edited by Otis L. Graham Jr.
and Meghan Robinson Wander.

Illustrated. 483 pp. Boston:

G. K. Hall & Company. \$27.50.

A CARING SOCIETY

*The New Deal, the Worker,
and the Great Depression.*

By Irving Bernstein.

Illustrated. 338 pp. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin Company. \$22.95.

By Richard J. Margolis

SURELY the Franklin D. Roosevelt revival this year, which marks the 40th anniversary of his death, is more than ceremonial. It may reflect our longing for a time when government was not the problem but the solution. It may also bespeak a new generation's joy at discovering behind history's marmoreal defenses a flesh-and-blood man of enormous appeal and complexity.

In "A Caring Society" — a title that accuses the present while describing the past — Irving Bernstein, a political scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, reinforces our respect for "a compassionate and popular government" that responds to civic agonies. In "Franklin D. Roosevelt," Otis L. Graham Jr., a historian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Meghan Robinson Wander, the executive editor of G. K. Hall's reference division, renew our sense of wonder at the man and his many contradictions.

"Franklin D. Roosevelt" is a browsable feast that comes to more than the sum of its more than 300 alphabetized parts. Half reference work and half celebration, it is bountiful and judicious throughout, beginning with "Agriculture Adjustment Administration" and ending with "Zionism." (Roosevelt made promises to Arab leaders, Melvin I. Urofsky writes, "even while assuring American Zionists of his support.")

My lone quarrel — it is really a quibble — is with the book's unavoidably piecemeal nature. The editors are probably correct when they observe that Roosevelt's presidency was "elusive" and "never adequately encompassed by any single interpretation." But interpretations by 125 contributors — journalists, biographers, historians, political scientists — do nothing to clarify matters. This is atomistic history, to borrow a term used by the brain trust Rexford G. Tugwell, who dismissed some of his New Deal colleagues' helter-skelter ways as a form of "atomistic progressivism."

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Still, most of these essayists would probably accept F.D.R.'s self-assessment as far as it went. "I dream dreams but am, at the same time, an intensely practical person," he said in a letter to Jan Christiaan Smuts. To which the historian James McGregor Burns has appended a decidedly sour judgment: "The more he preached his lofty ends and practiced his limited means . . . the more he widened the gap between popular expectations and actual possibilities."

But creating a sense of possibilities was one of Roosevelt's most valuable talents. Many contributors to "Franklin D. Roosevelt" marvel at his "sixth sense," his knack of knowing what the American people yearned for. As Harvard Sitkoff notes, despite the New Deal's racist record, Roosevelt "swelled hope in the formerly disheartened. A belief that 'we are on our way' took root in the Negro community." Bernard Asbell writes movingly of "the public's emotional shock" at F.D.R.'s death,

Richard J. Margolis, a columnist for The New Leader, is working on a book about the elderly poor.

and he cites Eleanor Roosevelt's own astonishment. "I never realized the full scope of the devotion to him until after he died," she would later comment. "I couldn't go into a subway in New York or cab without people stopping me to say they missed the way the president used to talk to them. They'd say 'He used to talk to me about my government.'"

The Government back then was growing more complicated. The editors have taken the trouble to compile a roster of about four dozen New Deal acronyms and abbreviations, some of which, like C.C.C., turn out to be twins. (You can choose between Civilian Conservation Corps and Commodity Credit Corporation.)

It was F.D.R.'s genius to simplify governmental complexities with homely explanations, as when he announced his intention to "quarantine" Fascist nations "to protect the health of the community." On the other hand, he could be surprisingly pretentious in denouncing his enemies with oratorical drum rolls like "economic royalists" and "malefactors of great wealth."

Roosevelt had eloquent speechwriters, including Samuel I. Rosenman — "Sammy the Rose," F.D.R. called him — and the playwright Robert Sherwood, who won four Pulitzer Prizes. But what made the speeches memorable was the President's delivery. "He gave the impression . . . of speaking to every listener personally," John Gunther said of Roosevelt's fireside chats. "You could practically feel him physically in the room."

Now, thanks to "Franklin D. Roosevelt," we can once again feel intimations of F.D.R.'s presence. The book's chief contribution, one hopes, will be in helping us refresh our memory of this remarkable leader who saw us through the worst of times.

Some of the pain of that period comes through in "A Caring Society," the final volume in Mr. Bernstein's trilogy, "A History of the American Worker 1933-1941," which he has been working on for more than a decade. His retracings of legislative battles over Social Security and other New Deal reforms seem neither fresh nor complete, but his portraits of Depression-bred sorrows are another and better story.

RELYING on contemporary testimony before Congress, as well as on novels, folk songs and memoirs, Mr. Bernstein has assembled an affecting pastiche of miseries: a Hooverville in Oklahoma City, for instance, where people lived in rusted-out car bodies, orange crates and piano boxes; or a textile mill in the South that paid workers an average of \$620 a year. In one of the novels Mr. Bernstein cites — "A Stone Came Rolling" by Fielding Burke — a visitor to a Southern mill town asks an old black woman if anyone in her family is working. "No," she replies, "we's jest perishin.'"

Roosevelt was unable to end the Depression; it remained for World War II to accomplish that. But Mr. Bernstein thinks the New Deal's arsenal of alphabetical agencies — W.P.A., F.E.R.A., N.L.R.B., to name a few — ultimately paid off. These agencies gave relief to the unemployed, put millions back to work and fortified wages through collective bargaining. Even people still at the bottom could feel their Government cared, and that gave them hope. "The lifting of public confidence," Mr. Bernstein writes, "was probably Franklin Roosevelt's greatest accomplishment." □