

A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis. By Alan Lawson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xv + 280 pp. Index, bibliography. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-801-88406-3.

Reviewed by Jason Scott Smith

In polished, energetic prose, Alan Lawson's *A Commonwealth of Hope* presents a strong and important argument for viewing the New Deal as an intellectually coherent episode of reform, one marked by deep continuities with previous such moments in American history. In so doing, Lawson breaks sharply from much previous scholarship, which has often stressed either the pragmatic and improvisatory aspects of President Franklin Roosevelt's program or the incomplete nature of the New Deal's response to the Great Depression. Instead, Lawson constructs a thoughtful and comprehensive narrative overview of the New Deal that—much as Eric Goldman's *Rendezvous with Destiny* did for earlier generations of readers—interprets it as the culmination of many years of liberal thinking about the social problems created by capitalism.

Central to Lawson's interpretative strategy is his claim that FDR and his advisers were explicitly drawing upon longstanding traditions of mutuality, a "perennial American yearning for a cooperative commonwealth," within which all would share "a decent standard of living, just working conditions, conservation of resources, aesthetic fulfillment, educational attainment, and the full rights of citizenship" (pp. 38, 91). Lawson's case for this concept is at its strongest when he is chronicling the intellectual histories and biographies of FDR's Brains Trust. Advisers like Raymond Moley, Rexford Tugwell, and Adolf Berle, steeped in the historical institutionalism of such scholars as John Commons, Simon Patten, and Wesley Clair Mitchell, drew upon their education and experiences in proposing solutions to the Great Depression. Their advice met a receptive leader in FDR, whose "broad communal vision and experience as a progressive politician" had "made him receptive to planning long before the Depression" (p. 53).

The cooperative commonwealth serves Lawson's narrative well in several respects. While helping Lawson trace the different ideological strands that informed New Deal planning, it also assists him in bringing some measure of coherence to the many "alphabet agencies" created during the Roosevelt presidency. FDR, as a consequence, emerges in this book as a principled leader, motivated by a "self-assured mix of faith, moral standards, and practicality" (p. 39). By clarifying the intellectual stakes of the New Deal in such a bold fashion, Lawson is able to throw into relief the controversial nature of the New Dealers' many fights to achieve their reforms.

The narrative benefits provided by Lawson's cooperative commonwealth do come with some interpretive costs, however. Lawson's New Deal is more the project of intellectual experts and advisers, and less an agenda reflecting the political desires of the Democratic Party. Individuals such as Postmaster General (and chairman of the Democratic Party) James Farley and FDR's political adviser, Louis Howe, are thus relatively minor players in this account. While Lawson provides a terrific chapter on the Supreme Court's relationship to the New Deal, chronicling FDR's ill-fated plan to expand the Court by appointing new justices, this measure—a classic political power grab, if ever there was one—fits awkwardly into the framework of a cooperative commonwealth tradition. Even Lawson's treatment of the agency that perhaps best epitomized the early New Deal's commitment to cooperative ideals, the National Recovery Administration, concludes by noting the utter failure of government to reconcile the interests of business, consumers, and labor, observing that the subsequent passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 constituted the substitution of "an adversarial approach" to collective bargaining for "a cooperative one" (p. 97). On the whole, the cooperative commonwealth largely disappears from the narrative following FDR's reelection in 1936, replaced for the most part by a renewed emphasis on conflict. As Lawson himself notes, in the 1936 campaign FDR was unusually frank in casting his opponents as, to quote FDR, "the forces of selfishness and of lust for power" (p. 162).

Business historians and scholars with interests in financial and economic history will pay special attention to Lawson's treatment of these issues. Throughout his account, Lawson effectively and concisely summarizes the key New Deal measures regarding such topics as banking, the stock market, and fiscal policy, although conservative

businessmen and opponents of the New Deal receive comparatively little attention. For example, while Lawson addresses the role played by the American Liberty League in opposing the New Deal and FDR, he does not discuss how the DuPont family provided the bulk of the League's funding. Lawson's treatment of the business community is stronger when he is dealing with the plans and backgrounds of businessmen like Edward Filene, Gerard Swope, and Owen Young, who were more connected to the cooperative commonwealth tradition.

Overall, Lawson's narrative is animated by a passionate drive to recover the New Deal as an episode in the history of reform that can usefully inform our present moment. This drive at times creates a tension in Lawson's account. For Lawson, the emphasis placed by Alan Brinkley's *The End of Reform* and Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle's *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* on the New Deal's limitations is clearly troubling, and he terms these scholars as being among "the more apocalyptic critics" of the New Deal (p. 248). But at points Lawson seems to agree with the broad outlines of arguments like Brinkley's, as when he writes that World War II "had the paradoxical result of both achieving recovery from the Depression through massive spending and job creation and displacing the aim of a cooperative commonwealth with a centralized command structure devoted to military victory" (p. 235). Indeed, much of Lawson's epilogue makes clear the many entrenched obstacles to the continuance of the New Deal's reform program. These minor criticisms aside, though, this sparkling and engagingly written study contains many wonderful features, including an illuminating chapter on the New Deal's cultural programs, and, not least, an "essay on sources" that historians will be mining for years to come. Scholars interested in the histories of the New Deal, the federal government, and the Great Depression must read this provocative and elegant book.

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Postwar World, *a study of how New Deal–inspired methods of regulating capitalism were exported overseas after World War II.*