

Erling Bjøl, *Politikens USA historie, Vols. 1-3*, Illustrated by Knud Sandvej. Copenhagen: Politikens forlag, 1987/188.

With the publishing of this history of the United States in three volumes, Politikens forlag attempts to fill a large gap in Danish historical literature. It is the first time that a work on American history of such a scope has been published in Denmark. All three volumes are written by Erling Bjøl, former professor of international politics at Aarhus University, and a remarkably productive author since the early 1950s. His production within the last decades includes *Verdenshistorien efter 1945, Vols. 1-3*, *Vor tids kulturhistorie, Vols. 1-3*, as well as several volumes in *Politikens Verdenshistorie* (among them one on ancient Rome). As indicated by the diversity of his previous production, this is not the work of a scholar with a lifelong devotion to studies in American history, but rather the work of a generalist with a reputation of being able to explore new fields of study in a short time, and then present them in a well-written and entertaining form to the general public.

The first volume, *En nations fødsel*, gives an outline of American geography, and describes the period from the first settlements in New England and the Chesapeake Bay to the end of the American Civil War in 1865. The second volume, *Samfund i vækst*, covers the period from Reconstruction to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the third volume, *Amerika midt i verden*, covers the period from the Second World War to the present.

Despite his eloquent style, Bjøl has produced a very uneven and often unstructured work. Both the quality and the focus of the various chapters seem

man at kalde Kennedy–hoffet efter en musical af Fredrick Loewe om den keltiske sagnkonge Arthur. Denne musical efterfulgte i vinteren 1960-61 My **Fair** Lady p i Broadway (Vol. 3, p. 119).

Bjøl's account of political history is mostly limited to brief biographical sketches of the presidents and a few other prominent politicians. He rarely makes any attempts to trace ideological currents and point out longer lines of development. It is almost emblematic that Bjøl's account of the relationship between the Progressive Era and *the New Deal* is limited to an account of the remote family–relations between Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

Kun 1930'erne kan med Franklin Delano Roosevelts *New Deal* sidestilles med den progressive tidsalder. Der var en sammenhæng. Også i århundredets første årti var det en Roosevelt, der gav tonen an, præsident Theodore Roosevelt ... (Vol. 2, p. 102).

Likewise, only a minimum of attention is given to the political parties and the dynamics of the various party-systems in American history, the struggle within the parties, the changing coalitions and the ideological currents that shape politics in the United States. A brief consultation with some of the many case–studies in voting behavior which have been published in the United States since the introduction of *quantitative social-scientific history* more than thirty years ago, could probably have provided a deeper understanding of American politics.

Bjøl's work is not an attempt to make a personal interpretation of American history, but he could at least have pointed out some of the controversial issues in American history, presented conflicting views on these issues and commented on them. In other words, Bjøl could have provided the reader with a sense of American history as an active field of research. A field where issues are constantly being reinterpreted, where new methods of historical research are being implemented, and where new topics are being discovered. he fails to do so. Where other historians are mentioned, it tends to be name–dropping, and apart from the time period covered by the work, there is not much in terms of methodology or the selection of topics to indicate that this work has been written in the late 1980s.

Although it is of minimal importance compared to the analytical flaws of the work, it would have been nice to have been spared some of Bjøl's home–made translations of American concepts, e.g. "vedbend universiteter" (Ivy league universities), "rødnakker" (rednecks), "Grønbacker" (Greenbackers), "møgrøgtre" (muckrackers), "højbrynede og lavbrynede (highbrow and lowbrow).

to be too dependent on the books that he has come across in the course of his writing. Among the better chapters are the ones on the Gilded Age, and the Carter-administration. Among the weakest is his chapter on the 1920s, where he attempts to give a kaleidoscopic view of the *roaring* twenties. Valentino, Houdini, Al Capone, Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, and Charles A. Lindbergh are all there, but the presidencies of Harding and Coolidge, as well as the nation's political life in general are hardly touched upon. Even if Bjøl's main emphasis on the cultural aspects of American history is accepted, he still fails to see some of the most crucial events of the decade in their proper context. The trial against Sacco and Vanzetti, to give one example, is briefly mentioned between Al Capone and Charles R. Walgreen, the alleged inventor of the drugstore ("Al Capone lykkedes det først at få bag lås og slå, da han blev anklaget for skattesvig. Værre gik det to italienerne..."). The trial is not in any way used to illustrate the Red scare and the widespread nativism and hatred of foreigners that climaxed in the 1920s. In the same way, Bjøl spends seven lines on the famous Scopes-trial, without any kind of reference to the widespread *Kulturkampf* between modernist and Fundamentalists of which the trial was the culmination. To make matters worse, Bjøl has totally misunderstood the outcome and the consequences of the trial itself: "Sagen blev afslutningen på William Jennings Bryans lange løbebane. Han vandt den og døde derpå. Darwin tabte" (Vol. 2, p. 201). John Scopes deliberately broke the so-called Butler Anti-evolution Act as a favor the American Civil Liberties Union. The whole idea was to get the opportunity to appeal the case to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which they did. Even more important, however, Bryan's decision to take the witness stand during the trial, made fundamentalism a laughing-stock for the entire nation, and when he died a week later, deeply humiliated, he left fundamentalism as a national movement in shambles.

Politikens USA historie is loaded with anecdotes and inside stories. Many of them are indiscreet and most of them are truly entertaining. However, Bjøl rarely uses such stories to illustrate a point or anything of that nature. Too many of them simply have the character of gossip, and appear distracting rather than illuminating. Given the author's scholarly background in international politics, the most surprising thing about Bjøl's work is the lack of political analysis, and the lack of any real attempts to pin down central themes in American culture. Too many paragraphs are simply accumulations of facts, tied together by Bjøl's smooth style of writing. The author often manages to make connections that gives the appearance of coherence, but can't withstand a closer inspection:

Det Hvide Hus blev et strålende, glihende renzssancehof, som billedbladene ikke kunne få nok af, og selv kræsne æggehoveder faldt for. *Camelot* begyndte

Knud Sandvej has edited the illustrations, which make up for about a third of the work, and he has done an outstanding job. The many rare photos, cartoons, and illustrations alone make the work worth having.

Regardless of Bjøl's literary skills, his good sense of humor, his eye for entertaining quotations and anecdotes, and the many interesting facts which he has included in his work, one wishes that he had traded some of his productivity in for further reflections and better structure. To many people with a general interest in American history *Politikens USA historie* will be a source of many hours of enjoyable reading. Those in search of a deeper understanding of it, however, will have to look elsewhere.

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