

MacColl, E. Kimbark, *The Growth of a City — Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950*. Portland, Oregon: The Georgian Press, 1979. Pp. 717. \$17.95

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Volume 9, Number 2, October 1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019346ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019346ar>

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Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wooley, W. T. (1980). Review of [MacColl, E. Kimbark, *The Growth of a City — Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950*. Portland, Oregon: The Georgian Press, 1979. Pp. 717. \$17.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 9(2), 148–149. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019346ar>

Nevertheless, the book is worth reading. And it is part of the series "Studies in Social History," which no respectable college or university library can be without.

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MacColl, E. Kimbark, *The Growth of a City - Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950*. Portland, Oregon: The Georgian Press, 1979. Pp. 717. \$17.95.

This study of Portland, Oregon, from 1915 to 1950, is a sequel to MacColl's earlier volume examining the same city prior to World War I. As in his first book, the author focusses on the shaping of Portland by its profit-oriented political-economic elite, a process of development that he roundly condemns. The enormous potential of the "City of Roses," MacColl laments, was betrayed by a crass coalition of merchants, bankers, utility executives, and realtors - men so devoted to private enterprise and property rights that they lacked any commitment to a larger public interest.

MacColl argues that Portland's elite was unusually incompetent in its smug complacency, its fear of importing new competing industries, and its nearly total neglect of urban planning. Highways knifed through the city; cancerous commercial developments destroyed pleasant residential areas; cheap suburbs grew helter-skelter; much housing was below standard; the Willamette River was polluted; and zoning regulations were so ineffective that for many years the city's major landmark was

"America's largest neon sign," a 725 by 60 foot monolith advertising Richfield Oil. Portland's leaders, according to MacColl, were uncommitted to quality, unconcerned about human values, unenterprising, visionless, and even excruciatingly dull. "The Spinster City" drew a Seattle writer's poisonous comment: "It's a great place to live, but would you want to visit?"

So many opportunities for improvement were lost. Planning studies were ignored; New Deal money was wasted; and cheap Bonneville power was not sufficiently utilized to create a diversified, buoyant economy. Despite prosperous war years, Portland was back in the doldrums by the late 1940s, a period "marked by political and cultural dullness, by municipal insolvency and by social discrimination." The city's leadership was tired, "well beyond middle age in vigor and outlook."

MacColl's indictment thus marches on, but, long before the final chapter, the reader grows weary of moral thunderbolts and yearns for more fully developed explanation. Why were Portland's leaders so unusually cautious, especially compared to the movers and shakers of Seattle and San Francisco? What was the impact of absentee ownership on Portland's economic development? Why, if leadership was so poor, did not the city's voters throw the rascals out? Or were the intellectual presuppositions of leaders and led much the same? - a notion MacColl treats gingerly since it would, if true, make his pillorying of individuals somewhat beside the point.

The Growth of a City contains a wealth of information about Portland's development from

World War I to 1950, with especially good chapters on transportation, suburbanization, and the issue of public versus private ownership of utilities. The book is a richly illustrated catalogue of famous men, important events, and the often sordid history of real estate deals, franchises, and Rotarian government. But such immense detail begs for greater selectivity, tighter organization, and more profound generalization. The reader would like more than an urban syllabus of errors.

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