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Book Review:

Wiegand, Wayne A. *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1996.

The theme of idealistic young reformer gone sour is common throughout history as well as fiction. A noteworthy example of the former is New York's legendary civic builder, Robert Moses, as profiled in Robert Caro's well-received 1974 biography *The Power Broker*, while Charles Foster Kane, the protagonist in Orson Welles's 1941 screen epic *Citizen Kane* is representative of the latter. In *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey*, Wayne Weigand paints a similar picture of pioneering librarian Melvil Dewey as the reformer who is ultimately defeated by his own arrogance, self-righteousness, and lust for power. Weigand's work is detailed and methodical, supported by significant archival evidence, and ignores neither Dewey's many professional accomplishments and contributions to the field of librarianship nor his personal weaknesses and character flaws.

Dewey had already chosen "reformer" as his career at the age of sixteen, which probably seemed as unorthodox in 1867 as it does today. He found his "causes" in the metric system, in spelling reform, and ultimately in public libraries. Dewey risked his life and his health rescuing books from a burning library at age seventeen, and Wiegand cites an endearing statement by Dewey, age 21, that sounds remarkably similar something an idealistic computer programmer might have said one hundred years later: "My heart is open to anything that's either decimal or about libraries." (p. 20). Like the fictional Charles Foster Kane and the real life Robert Moses, both of whom were similarly passionate about their causes at first, this passion led Dewey to cut the occasional corner and bend the occasional rule in pursuit of his reforms. It also led to self-righteousness and to an "end justifies the

means” orientation that rendered him defensive and unapologetic when confronted with these ethical (and sometimes legal) breeches. Weigand illustrates the difficulties of working with Dewey through an anecdote about an encounter with William F. Poole over unflattering comments published in *Library Journal*; Dewey’s response to Poole’s concerns was passive-aggressive at best, and there was no hint of an apology.

The fictional Kane’s downward spiral begins with the destruction of his marriage and his political career caused by his relationship he began with a singer he met on a street corner. The first indication of Dewey’s occurs perhaps when he first combines the accounts of the American Library Association, Spelling Reform Board, and the American Metric Board. It seems likely at this point that his actions reflect his personal difficulty at separating his good intentions from each other rather than something more sinister, but this sort of creative bookkeeping would become a theme throughout all his professional endeavors. Weigand portrays Dewey as something of an impulsive maverick during his years at Columbia University—a man willing to use whatever means necessary to further his goals; the creation of his essentially unauthorized library school is the primary example. There is also a hint that Dewey may be entirely averse to some level of personal gain; having a new library at his disposal proved both a good way to promote his theories and to test new items for his library supply business.

Like so many reformers, much of Dewey’s best work, particularly on his classification system and the collection management policy at Columbia, was completed during his younger and more idealistic years. By the time he becomes State Librarian and Secretary of the New York State University Board of Regents, Dewey seems to exhibit less interest in reform, except as a means to obtain or justify more power. However, he still seems to be able to convince himself that his motives are altruistic, and Weigand makes him seem generally hurt

by criticism. Dewey as a state employee more closely resembles Robert Moses, except that Dewey was not nearly so successful as Moses at his own power grab.

As it was with Moses and his “meat axe” approach to urban redevelopment, racial prejudice seems to be a factor in one of Dewey’s pet reforms, the summer camp at Lake Placid, New York. Unlike Robert Moses, who impacted tens of thousands of lives through his policies and lack of concern for the public, the damage done by Dewey was mostly limited to a small circle. In fact, most of this damage was inflicted on Dewey himself. Lake Placid is a subject Weigand explores intensively, stating that Dewey wanted to afford librarians and other middle class professionals an “opportunity to avoid contact with the kinds of people (working class, African-American, Jewish) that professionals were expected to assist as part of their professional opportunities” (p. 252). Dewey’s adherence to these exclusionary practices (which he instituted but preferred to blame on “the majority” at the club) ultimately cost him his job with the state, not to mention some of his credibility within the profession of librarianship. Characteristically, Dewey was apologetic about the controversy but not about the actual practices of his club. Devotion to this club also cost him his management role in his other businesses, as his creative accounting schemes intertwined the two in unsustainable ways. In an almost self-destructive twist worthy of the best fiction, Dewey then proceeded to put the very club that had cost him so much personally at risk to fund a second camp in Florida, where there were “fewer Negroes” than in the rest of the South (p. 352).

Like Charles Foster Kane, Dewey allowed his arrogance and self-righteousness to destroy family relationships, although Dewey at least seems to have found a soul mate in his first wife, Annie. His early relationship with his son is not really covered in this book; Godfrey Dewey is born in 1887 during an ALA conference and is not heard from again until the first conflict with his father over stock in the Lake Placid Club. Their relationship by this time

seems more antagonistic than affectionate. There is also relatively little discussion of Dewey's home life with Annie aside from the fact that she shared many of his goals, defended him on occasion, and apparently did not share a bed with him. It would be interesting to learn more about how their lives together differed from the rather unemotional home where Melvil Dewey was raised and how that may have affected other aspects of his life. Dewey's alleged womanizing cost him his leadership role at the ALA, and was apparently a common thread in his life, although the evidence suggests more sexual harassment than actual sexual misconduct.

Although this would obviously be dependent on the sources available, it would also be helpful to have more information on Dewey's early professional years, including his early library work and the creation of his classification system. Weigand seems to speed through these early days, slowing the pace somewhat at Columbia and then significantly when Dewey goes to work for the state of New York.

Weigand's liberal use of "simplified spelling" quotes from Dewey's diaries and correspondence has the effect of making Dewey's obsession with spelling reform almost more prominent than the library standardization for which he is best known. The author also seems to delight in using the unorthodox and often bizarre spelling ("stud prunes") to punctuate Dewey's personality quirks in general. This adds a bit of humor to what could otherwise be a fairly sad story.

Dewey will long be recognized for his contributions to the field of librarianship. Weigand demonstrates the passion that drove many of his accomplishments and also calls into question his personal character, even suggesting that it may have colored some of his achievements (e.g. promoting female librarianship for financial rather than ethical reasons). Weigand also recognizes that Dewey was a product of his time. *Irrepressible Reformer* is the well-researched product of fifteen years of amazing archival research. It is well-written and

fascinating to read, and allows the reader to balance Dewey's significant contributions against his personal failings.