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Michigan COMMENTARY

A review of George Weeks, Stewards of the State: The Governors of Michigan

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Michigan's governors are an intriguing group of heads of state. Most were competent, some were brilliant, a few were visionary, and, occasionally, one was inept. George Weeks's 1987 book, Stewards of the State, lets us view our chief executives close up.

Weeks, now a political columnist for the Detroit News, spent fourteen years with United Press International as Lansing bureau chief and, later, as foreign editor in Washington. He became a major player in Michigan government when he interrupted his journalistic career to become press secretary and later chief of staff to Governor William G. Milliken. The author's father, the late Don Weeks, was also a newspaperman and served in state government.

Based on extensive research, the author has produced an entertaining, enlightening, and attractive book. Particularly in the first chapter and an epilogue, Weeks identifies the common issues and problems most governors faced, but the book is a collective biography rather than a history and analysis of Michigan's political and governmental development.

Stewards of the State begins with short introductory chapters briefly covering colonial (1603-1792) and territorial (1787-1835) governors. Only one, Lewis Cass (1813-1829), receives separate treatment. Cass led Michigan from wilderness to settlement. He was also a force on the national scene, serving as secretary of state from 1857 to 1860 and running a losing race for president in 1848.

With statehood in 1837, the real meat of the book begins. Weeks provides a capsule personal/political biography of each of the state's forty-three elected governors. Inevitably, better known or more activist chief executives receive the most attention. These include Stevens T. Mason (1835-1840), who was elected governor at age 25 and nursed Michigan through the comedic war with Ohio into the Union; Austin Blair (1861-1864), whose passion for human equality and the Union cause guided Michigan through the Civil War; Hazen Pingree (1897-1900), who as mayor of Detroit and governor fought the conservative business power brokers of his own party and became the "Idol of the People"; Chase S. Osborn (1911-1912), Michigan's only governor from the Upper Peninsula, who championed many reforms of the Progressive movement; Alexander J. Grosbeck (1921-1928), an administrative master, who was responsible for organizing a truly modern state government; and Frank Murphy (1937-1938), who implemented the New Deal in Michigan and mediated the labor strife that brought unions to political parity with big business.

Weeks's research and writing are nearly flawless as he reviews the successes, failures, and foibles of these leaders. The most revealing part of the book, however, comes toward the end in his discussion of Michigan's last

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five governors: G. Mennen Williams (1949-1960), John B. Swainson (1961-1962), George Romney (1963-1969), William G. Milliken (1969-1982), and James J. Blanchard (1983-). Much of what he writes about these men is based on personal observation and extensive interviews. Williams and his brilliant advisors shattering Michigan's political structure; Swainson struggling with political and personal adversity; Romney, in a gregarious, forceful style, implementing a new constitution and containing the turbulent '60s; Milliken, with a gentle manner, confronting the era's social and environmental issues and the enmity of his party's conservative wing; Blanchard, with cautious instincts, coping with fiscal disaster and the state's uncertain future are all deftly portrayed. Perhaps the best chapter, certainly the most poignant, concerns the triumph, fall from grace, and resurrection of John Swainson.

The author's political and personal preferences are mostly well masked. However, his treatment of Milliken cannot help but, to some degree, reflect his services in the Milliken administration and the close friendship of the two men.

The book concludes with four additional chapters covering first ladies, lieutenant governors, political cartoons, the capitals and capitols of Michigan, governor's residences at Lansing and Mackinac Island, and a photographic memoir of governors at the opening day of Detroit Tiger baseball. Paula Blanchard's essay on first ladies is long on insight into the stress a highly visible political life brings to a marriage.

Biography by its nature focuses on the individual rather than the forces that shape and even mandate one's action. George Weeks seems to know this and occasionally attempts to show that impersonal engines of economics and society controlled a particular governor's destiny. Recurrent themes surface: economic boom and bust, the necessity of industrial diversification, sectional rivalry, inter- and intraparty conflict, legislative-executive power struggles, and the tensions of race and class are only a few. On page three of his book, Weeks says

Michigan's governors have earned their pay dealing with recurrent economic setbacks; floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters; riots and other civil strife; wartime mobilization; the health, welfare, education, and public safety of millions of citizens, and otherwise tending to the well-being of a state that in population, size, budget, exports, diversity, complexity, and other measurements exceeded many nations.

Stewards of the State is an entertaining book and an important contribution to Michigan's historical literature. Our chief executives are not only highly visible leaders, they are reflections of their times and of ourselves.

George Weeks, Stewards of the State: The Governors of Michigan, edited by Robert D. Kirk (Detroit and Ann Arbor, Mich.: The Historical Society of Michigan and the Detroit News, 1987). Illus., 193 pp., \$25.00. Order from the Historical Society of Michigan, 2117 Washtenaw Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48104.