

mentored, as she did those of Elizabeth Spencer and Richard Ford and many others. Her goodness was not naive, nor her politeness prudery, nor her love of home provincial. If, for Sinclair Lewis, everyone needs a hometown to get away from, for Welty, her hometown was home. Her art made of it an everywhere. William Buckley once asked her on *Firing Line*, "How . . . could a sensitive Southern writer have lived" in Mississippi with its lynchings and fiery crosses? She answered, in a polite way of course, How could she not?

Like Carson McCullers (whom she didn't like), Eudora Welty knew that the heart is a lonely hunter; like Flannery O'Connor (whom she admired), she knew that the violent bear it away. But, most of all, like

William Faulkner ("besides being the greatest writer to me, an attractive, darling person"), she knew that we are kin as well as strangers, and laughable as well as heroic; she knew that comedy and tragedy, "the bizarre and the terrible," cannot be separated, and that given a choice between grief and nothing, she'd take grief.

An optimist's daughter, she agreed with Ken Millar's response to the bombing of Hanoi, "I believe we'll turn back from our own violence, and see what we have done is something that we can never do again." She would know now that they were wrong. But she wouldn't stop hoping.

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Fallen Chief to Fallen Chads

RESTLESS GIANT:

The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore.

By James T. Patterson. Oxford Univ. Press.

448 pp. \$35

Reviewed by David M. Oshinsky

When Richard Nixon resigned his presidency in August 1974, there was more relief than celebration. The country had been spared a lacerating impeachment process. A new president, widely hailed for his honesty, was sworn into office without violence or disorder. "Our long national nightmare is over," Gerald R. Ford assured the public. "Our Constitution works."

This remarkable moment provides the opening for *Restless Giant*, the latest contribution to the multivolume Oxford History of the United States. Previous books include James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) and David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear* (1999), both Pulitzer Prize winners, as well as James T. Patterson's own *Grand Expectations* (1996), a superb history of the United States from 1945 to 1974. *Restless Giant* is a cut below these works—partly because there hasn't been enough time and distance to re-

flect fully on such recent events, and partly because so much has changed since the bitter campaign, political and then legal, of Bush versus Gore. Despite the author's imposing narrative skills, I suspect that this book will be seen more as a starting point than as a standard work for future scholars.

Patterson, a historian at Brown University, notes that the 1970s didn't go as smoothly as Gerald Ford had hoped. The long nightmare may have been over, but a lot of bad dreams remained. The OPEC oil embargo, the fall of South Vietnam, the near meltdown at Three Mile Island, the Iran hostage crisis—all contributed to a mood of pessimism and unease. The civil rights movement, so confident in the heroic era of bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins, split over such issues as forced busing and black power. As middle-class whites fled to the suburbs in record numbers, New York and other cities went bankrupt, laying off thou-

sands of teachers, firefighters, and police. Divorce and violent crime rates shot up, while student test scores tumbled. For the first time since the Great Depression of the 1930s, a majority of Americans ended a decade in worse economic shape than they had begun it.

Patterson nonetheless sees the grimness associated with the decade as somewhat overstated. The times may have been rough, he says, but they neither defined a new age of limits for the United States, as many argued at the time, nor signaled its permanent decline. Most Americans had grown up in a time of affluence, conditioned to expect a life of uninterrupted progress. In this insulated world of entitlement, writes Patterson, “many people concluded in the late 1970s that the nation was in deep trouble. Even Americans who were doing a little better at the time often talked as if they were doing worse. As if caught on a treadmill, they were often anxious about the present and wary about the future.”

It's a point well taken. Some of the trends of the 1970s weren't necessarily as menacing as they first appeared. A rising divorce rate, for example, could be interpreted as the mark of a more tolerant, less censorious society. A drop in SAT scores partly indicated that low-income and minority students were applying to college in greater numbers. The rising crime rate was in large measure due to a temporary surge in the size of the age group most likely to break the law, 14-to-24-year-old males. By the 1990s, violent crime had decreased dramatically in the United States. So had homelessness, teenage pregnancy, and abortion.

But many other trends of the era still resist judgment. One can only wonder how future historians will deal with skyrocketing oil prices and Islamic fundamentalism—issues that first took shape for Americans in the 1970s, disappeared from public consciousness for a time, then resurfaced with dramatic force in the years following 2000.

As is natural in a broad history of an era, Patterson must pick and choose from a mountain of material. Favoring political, economic, and social themes, he mostly steers clear of mass culture, ignoring the impact on American lives of sports, leisure, entertainment, and even technology. But he is strong on matters of race and ethnicity, closely fol-

lowing the emergence of forced busing and affirmative action as major issues, and shrewdly demonstrating the importance of the often overlooked Immigration Act of 1965 in remaking the nation's population by permitting family members of American citizens both naturalized and native born to enter the United States. Before 1965, Europe had accounted for 90 percent of new arrivals; since then, the overwhelming majority of legal immigrants have come from Asia and Latin America.

The political portraits in *Restless Giant* are sound but predictable. Jimmy Carter comes off as someone with the decency of a saint and the vision of a technocrat. A loner, unwilling to compromise, he becomes a Democratic Herbert Hoover, bunkered in the White House as the nation lurches from crisis to crisis. Ronald Reagan is very much the man we see in Lou Cannon's biographies—focused, well prepared, and unyielding on matters that interest him (such as tax cuts, deregulation, and the military clout to fight communism); forgetful, easily bored, and oblivious when it comes to matters that don't interest him (which included just about everything else). George H. W. Bush is lauded for his coalition-building and military restraint during the Gulf War, as well as his focus on education at home. What finished him off, says Patterson, was not the economic downturn, which had largely ended by 1992, but rather Bush's inability “to grasp an important fact about late 20th-century American politics. Winning a presidential election had come to require full-time, all-absorbing attention.”

Bill Clinton understood this in spades. A combination policy wonk and master salesman, he knew that Democratic Party activists had moved too far left since the 1970s, leaving the party's traditional constituencies behind. Caring little about international affairs—“Foreign policy is not what I came here to do,” he admitted—he made his mark as a free-trader, a budget balancer, and a welfare reformer. Like other presidents, says Patterson, Clinton grabbed more credit for the nation's successes than he probably deserved. After all, the economic boom of the 1990s also included an overheated stock market, a growing trade imbalance, and a frightening jump in consumer debt. As for Monica Lewinsky and impeachment, Patterson simply summarizes what is al-

ready well known: Clinton proved himself a liar, Kenneth Starr dogged him with a prudish zeal that most Americans found offensive, and the nation stumbled on. For Patterson, as for others, the Lewinsky affair was an inevitable escalation of the partisan bloodletting that engulfed Washington in this era, culminating in the election of 2000.

Restless Giant ends with a tight summary of the Bush-Gore campaign, noting that more Florida voters probably *intended* to cast ballots for Al Gore than for George W. Bush, but some of them—perhaps a decisive proportion—were stymied by the butterfly ballot. What is certain, says Patterson, is that the nation and its politics have changed dramatically in the decades since Watergate. The Republican Party has been reborn, energized by a new conservative base. Yet politics at the national level has become something of a standoff, with most voters clustered near the vital center and neither party having the overwhelming edge enjoyed by Democrats during the terms of

Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Sadly, the resulting frustrations fuel a meaner brand of politics, with little prospect of relief.

Still, says Patterson, the United States of 2000 was a better, safer place than the United States of 1974. Americans, especially minorities, had more rights and opportunities than before. The specter of communism was gone; the fear of nuclear war had subsided. The quality of life, “bolstered by the bounteous resources and receptivity to change that had always been hallmarks of American history, [had] improved in manifold ways.”

And yet, looking back on that time from this time, it seems so long, long ago.

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Serving Up Subversion

STEPIN FETCHIT:

The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry.

By Mel Watkins. Pantheon Books. 352 pp. \$26.95

Reviewed by Richard Schickel

Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry (1902–85)—to call Stepin Fetchit by his gaudy given name—is among the movies’ most paradoxical figures. He became famous in the early 1930s, and soon after that infamous, by playing a highly stylized character: a shuffling, inarticulate, bone-lazy servant, generally in the employ of Southern massas twinkling tolerantly or fuming impotently at his ineptitude. From the outset, this figure, though hilarious to many blacks, discomfited their upwardly striving brethren, who were justifiably eager to set aside the demeaning stereotypes by which they had forever been represented in show business. In time, the latter view prevailed, and Stepin Fetchit’s very stage name—borrowed from a racehorse on

which he once won a few bucks—came to symbolize everything that was contemptible in Hollywood’s historical depictions of blacks.

Yet—and here’s one paradox—the off-screen Step was exactly the opposite of his public persona. He was a proud, even arrogant, man, whose fights with the studios (mainly Twentieth Century-Fox) for more money and more screen time doubtless did as much to shorten his stardom as shifting public tastes did. Often quarrelsome with directors, producers, and costars, he was a frequent no-show on the set. He was irresponsible in his off hours as well. His romantic life was something of a scandal, and he was a famously bad driver, often wrecking the fabulous cars—at one time he was said to