Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota’s Protest Tradition
Rhoda R. Gilman

This is the book I have been waiting for. As a student of Minnesota’s protest tradition, I have wished someone would write a short, engaging narrative on the progressive social movements that have shaped our state’s political culture. In Stand Up! The Story of Minnesota’s Protest Tradition, historian Rhoda Gilman has done just that.

Writing with color and economy, Gilman introduces readers to leaders well and less well known: Ignatius Donnelly, the fiery populist; Floyd B. Olson, Minnesota’s beloved Farmer-Labor governor; Eva McDonald, labor organizer and journalist. She provides brief but vivid accounts of the abolitionist movement in the first years of Minnesota statehood, the agrarian revolts of the late-nineteenth century, the labor struggles of the twentieth century, and the decades-long crusades for strong public institutions to serve the common good. Exhaustive but not exhausting, Gilman’s story spans the breadth of Minnesota movement history, from the Green Back Party of the nineteenth century to the Green Party of the twenty-first.

But this book is more than a colorful retelling of Minnesota’s storied past. Gilman connects the action on the ground with broad economic and cultural shifts. She demonstrates parallels that extend with particular clarity from the 1870s through the 1930s. The fault lines that fueled social protest in Minnesota were primarily economic: farmers and laborers versus trusts and monopolies. In Minnesota the Populist movement, defeated in most parts of the nation by the end of the nineteenth century, allied with an emerging working class to create an even more powerful Farmer-Labor movement in the first third of the twentieth.

Gilman constructs a further parallel between the Progressive Era of government reform in the early 1900s and the era of bipartisan reform in Minnesota politics from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. Just as Progressive Era reforms were a response to the grassroots populist organizing at the turn of the century, the response of both major parties to the radical challenges of the 1930s was a moderate reform agenda that lasted until the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. Hubert Humphrey would not have been possible without the more radical Floyd B. Olson. The moderate, forward-looking Republican Party that cooperated with DFLers to make Minnesota what Time magazine in 1972 called the “State that Works” was forged in 1938, when a young reformer named Harold Stassen defeated Farmer-Labor governor Elmer Benson.

Not surprisingly, Gilman’s narrative loses some of its focus when discussing the social movements of the 1960s. It is challenging to link a movement that proclaimed “Never trust anybody over 30” with earlier generations. On the surface, the feminist, environmentalist, antiwar, and countercultural movements had little relationship to earlier ones based on class struggle. Protestors might wear blue jeans and work shirts, but the resemblance often ended there. Yet these “new social movements” were building on an old social-movement tradition. In acting up, they were standing up, just like their populist ancestors. By extending her discussion in later chapters to include Ecopolitics and the Green Party in the 1990s, Gilman reminds us of the importance of third-party politics in the state’s history.

In one critical area Gilman missed an opportunity to more clearly connect the present with the past. Beginning in the 1980s, the class issues that once dominated Minnesota politics reemerged. Once again, Minnesota was home to creative and hard-fought campaigns to protect workers and farmers. In west-central Minnesota, farmers created an organization called Groundswell and rediscovered the tactics used by the Farm Holiday Association in the early 1930s to fight farm foreclosures. In a campaign Gilman does discuss, workers at the Hormel plant in Austin, home of the nation’s first sit-down strike in 1933, waged a furious but unsuccessful campaign against contract concessions. In a state where few remembered why there was an FL in the DFL, some Minnesotans thus became acquainted with the state’s protest tradition. Among them was Paul Wellstone, who considered himself a Farmer-Labor populist as well as a Democratic liberal.

My main message is this: read this book! Whatever your politics, you will come away with a deeper understanding of Minnesota’s present and perhaps even an idea or two for our future.

Reviewed by Tom O’Connell, professor of political studies at Metropolitan State University (St. Paul and Minneapolis) and a student of Minnesota’s progressive and populist history. His article on Fr. Francis Gilligan and the struggle for civil rights in Minnesota (co-authored by Tom Beer) won the 2011 Solon J. Buck Award for the best article published in Minnesota History.
Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture  
Pamela H. Simpson  

“We used to have meat in our freezer, but now we have roughly 180 pounds of butter with another 90 pounds to come in September,” said Kia Vander Kooi, a finalist in the 2006 Princess Kay of the Milky Way competition. The third Vander Kooi sister to represent Nobles County in the dairy competition, Kia was anticipating posing in a freezer at the Minnesota State Fair as her likeness was carved in butter.

The Vander Kooi family history of butter sculptures spanned ten years. Readers of Pamela H. Simpson’s Corn Palaces and Butter Queens will learn that this art form has a much longer, more varied history. Simpson termed her subject “food-art constructions”: crop art, buildings made from or covered with various grains, and sculpted foodstuffs, especially butter. The book draws heavily on journal articles Simpson published over the past decade, an approach resulting in some redundancy and discontinuity. But that’s a minor flaw in an otherwise engaging study.

Corn Palaces and Butter Queens is a welcome antidote to publications and websites dismissing crop art and dairy sculptures as kitsch. Simpson was an art history professor, and her academic training served her well here. She positioned her sources—ranging from period newspapers and archival collections to visual evidence found on eBay—within a cultural landscape of changing artistic trends, gender roles, agrarianism, and the concept of abundance, a thread that runs throughout the book. The result is a detailed but readable narrative that moves easily from a character study of a butter sculptor to a summary of the rise of the butter industry, from the iconography of a corn palace to the building’s role in a program of civic boosterism.

The book is organized around three questions: Where did this food-art tradition come from? Why were these displays made? And what did they mean to their makers and audience? Chapter one moves from the Satyricon’s exaggerated comic descriptions of edible sculptures through a summary of early sugar art and butter sculptures to a description of the land of Cockaigne—in folk tradition, a place with rivers of porridge and houses of bread—and, finally, to “trophy” displays at industrial expositions, all of which are characterized as precedents for later food art and architecture.

Simpson’s careful reading of her sources—especially the cache of photographs, postcards, and other visual evidence she assembled—yields a wealth of engaging details that point to larger themes.

The most satisfying analyses are found in chapters two through five, where Simpson explores the popularity and significance of food art from 1870 to 1930. She first takes the reader to the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, where pioneering crop artist Henry Worrall set a new standard. She continues on to chart the evolution of the Mitchell, South Dakota, Corn Palace from a symbol of civic pride to its current status as a tourist destination. From here she plunges into extended studies of Carolyn Shawks Brooks, a gifted artist whose butter sculpture, Dreaming Iolanthe, launched her long career, and John K. Daniels, the St. Paul-trained sculptor whose butter Minnesota state capitol (modeled on the Cass Gilbert design) caused a sensation at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. Along the way she provides stylistic and iconographic interpretations of buildings and sculptures, analyzes the messages conveyed by crop art at world’s fairs, and presents a short but provocative discussion of the conflicted relationship of American Indian communities to the production, execution, and celebration of cereal architecture.

Chapters six and seven address the meaning of food art for its makers and its audience. Carolyn Brooks makes a return appearance here; Minnesota favorites, including Linda Christensen (sculptor of Princess Kay butter heads) and seed artist Lillian Colton, are also placed in historic context. Simpson returns to her study of American Indian artists and iconography through a section on Oscar Howe’s designs for the Mitchell Corn Palace.

The conclusion brings Simpson’s analysis up to the present, forcing a collision between the corn palace as a symbol of abundance and contemporary debates over the industrialization of corn production. Like so many other points in Simpson’s chronicle, this juxtaposition prompts the reader to pause and reconsider a deceptively simple art form. Food for thought, indeed.

Reviewed by Kate Roberts, senior exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society, who holds a PhD in art history from the University of Minnesota. She is the author of Minnesota 150: The People, Places, and Things That Shape Our State (MHS Press, 2007).
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