Science on Capitol Hill

Toward the Endless Frontier. History of the Committee on Science and Technology, 1959–79. KEN HECHLER. U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., 1980 (available from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C.). xxxvi, 1074 pp., illus. Paper, $11.

It has become common for congressional committees to commission and issue their own histories as committee prints on landmark occasions. It is thus hardly surprising that the House Committee on Science and Technology has marked its 20th year in this fashion. But the size of the volume—over 1100 pages—and, in some respects, its quality are more unusual. For both, one must credit Ken Hechler, member of the House and of the committee from 1959 to 1976. Involuntarily retired from his position as representative of West Virginia's Fourth District, Hechler agreed to write the committee's history when asked by Chairman Olin Teague, and apparently he spent a good part of 1978–79 on the project.

Hechler's credentials for such a task could be matched by few members of Congress. He was a respected political scientist and author of a book on the politics of the Taft era before he took an appointment at Marshall College in West Virginia in 1957 with politics on his mind. (He was in Congress within two years.) But as former Representative Charles Mosher notes in his introduction, the apprehensions committee leaders expressed about turning the project over to Hechler had to do not with any fear that he would take an overly academic approach but with his reputation when a member as something of a maverick. The committee establishment needn't have worried: Hechler writes as a true son of the Congress. His preoccupations and assumptions reflect a peculiarly congressional perspective on the world, and this accounts for many of the book's strengths and deficiencies.

Hechler's notion of what is significant about a committee's activity centers on the words that are exchanged, the information that is gathered, and the statutes that are crafted in the committee's meetings. I suppose that as an official chronicler he felt constrained to name lots of names for the sake of giving proper credit and to give each member's pet concern its due. But he goes far beyond the call of duty in this regard. Lengthy exchanges in hearings and the arguments members gave in defense of disputed positions are elaborated at the expense of analyses of their motivations, the forces to which they were responding, or their relative influence. Hechler is not much inclined to step back from the day-to-day flow of committee business. One leaves this 20-year retrospective wishing he had proposed and defended some broader generalizations regarding the main thrust of the committee's activity, the quality of its policy product, and its impact in relation to other actors and forces shaping science and space policy.

Hechler's account is personality-centered. He is unusually candid in his descriptions of the attitudes of members toward one another, although he seldom fails to qualify and blunt his own assessments. Legislative outcomes, Hechler often seems to assume, depend mainly on the skills of the individual protagonists and the strength of their arguments. His case-by-case account of committee activities, with a focus on who argued what, when, and where, discourages any search for patterns of action and inaction or for explanations that go beyond the agency of individuals. The book's early chapters do point to organizational characteristics of the committee that have shaped its policy role. The style of successive chairmen, intercommittee battles for jurisdiction, conflicts over minority staffing and subcommittee autonomy, and the committee's relations with NASA and the National Science Foundation are given suggestive treatment. But Hechler does not systematically develop such observations, and they become rarer in later chapters.

Hechler conveys a sense of how the committee's preoccupations, and its political attractiveness to its members, have varied with shifts in public opinion and in the international space race. But this sensitivity is overshadowed by a more static view of the committee's agenda—a huge workload, self-evident to the members in its dimensions, on which they labored with great diligence. One gains little sense of these legislators as politicians moved by a range of incentives and constraints, exploiting certain kinds of issues and leaving others undeveloped, systematically favoring some interests and values rather than others. Nor is Hechler inclined to undertake the sort of intercommittee comparison that might bring the committee's distinctiveness into focus. Probably an official history is the wrong place to look for the treatment of such matters. But they must be developed if a committee's policy role is to be adequately understood or evaluated.

Hechler's treatment has its virtues—in part as a corrective to social-scientific approaches that factor individual agency and expressed intentions out of the picture altogether. It provides the flavor of personal interactions in Congress and chronicles in a comprehensive and workmanlike fashion the policy involvements of the committee over two decades. The book is itself a primary document, revealing, as John Logsdon suggests in his foreword, "how Congress sees itself in operation."

Hechler's chronicle does not make fascinating reading; it is best used as a reference work, or sampled for topics of particular interest. Primarily descriptive, it will hardly satisfy those in search of explanation or analysis. But, as committee histories go, this one deserves a place of honor. And when one contemplates the use to which many legislators put their contacts and experience after retirement one feels increased admiration for Hechler's devotion of a year to producing this book.

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The Life of Malthus

Population Malthus. His Life and Times. PATRICIA JAMES. Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston, 1979. xviii, 524 pp. + plates. $43.50.

This is the first full-length biography of T. Robert Malthus (1766–1834). Patricia James has provided us a scholarly work based upon 15 years of research into published materials, manuscripts, official records, diaries, notes, and personal correspondence. The result of her effort is a detailed account of Malthus's life placed in historical and intellectual perspective. The biography is essentially chronological, as Malthus lived his life in rather distinct stages—a childhood with unconventional family and tutors, Student Malthus at Cambridge, Reverend Malthus, Population Malthus, Professor Malthus, and Economist Malthus.

The first *Essay on Population* was published anonymously in 1798 and was

significantly revised and expanded in the second edition of 1803. James notes that the difference between editions is so great that "one's general impression is that the two books are the work of two different men, and in a sense I think this impression is a true one." Reverend Malthus, who had been the curate of a remote church at Okewood, moved to London in 1800, "when the poor of England were near starvation." James attributes Malthus's intellectual growth to travel and to his friends—"And what friends they were!"

In 1803 Reverend Malthus was appointed rector of Walesby "and held the living without residing there until his death." This income was augmented with his appointment in 1805, upon the founding of the East India College, as Professor of History and Political Oeconomy. In 1804 Malthus married, and within three years there were three children. The third edition of the *Essay* was completed in 1806 amid controversies about his population theory, and a fourth edition was published in 1807. In addition, Professor Malthus was involved in protecting East India College from external pressures and then, for the rest of his academic career, helping protect the college from the students. James does an excellent job in describing the role played by Professor Malthus in the founding and the development of the East India College.

Malthus, as the first professor of political economy, began publishing papers and pamphlets in economics. In 1807 he published two editions of a pamphlet on the Poor Laws arguing that increased subsidies to the poor would lead to increased population and greater misery. With the debates over bullion and paper currency Malthus and David Ricardo met in 1811 and began "the controversies which were to occupy the two men so happily for the twelve years before Ricardo's untimely death in 1823." The quill-pen correspondence between these two great men, fortunately preserved, is quite large. Malthus also corresponded extensively with family, publishers, scholars, and friends. In 1814 he published two editions of a pamphlet on the Corn Laws. In 1815 he published an important pamphlet on rent and an unfortunate pamphlet supporting a restriction on the import of corn. This argument against free trade damaged his reputation as an economist. Malthus was arguing the need for England's self-sufficiency (this in the year that Napoleon escaped from Elba and was defeated at Waterloo). In 1817 the fifth edition of the *Essay* was published, with the *Principles of Political Economy* following in 1820. Malthus's lack of success as an economist is attributed to his "flickering torch of intuition which could throw spotlights, but not illuminate a whole scene." Ricardo's simple, complete, logical system triumphed over Malthus's more demand-oriented and incomplete analysis. Further, "it was surely inconsistent of Economist Malthus to say there were too few demanders for the products available, when Population Malthus had insisted that there were too many." James concludes that "in the economic debates of 1815–25 Malthus's was no longer the paramount name, just as he himself was no longer a pioneer with a single message." Malthus continued to write, continually revising, disconcertingly changing his mind, as he searched for truth.

The biography by James relates the lifetime of Malthus's intellectual search to the historical events of the period. Relying heavily on Malthus's correspondence, James provides a portrait of a kind, sensitive, rather unbusinesslike man. A great deal of Malthus's correspondence is quoted by James (there are 39 pages of notes and references) and is selected and arranged in a manner that allows a reader to get to know Malthus. With regard to the correspondence, James provides a brief interpretation that summarizes Malthus's character:

> One cannot but smile at the contrast between his private style of writing, for those with practical responsibilities, and his anonymous propagandist journalism; yet in neither case do I think he was acting a part: he operated with different sides of his nature as circumstances required, and whatsoever he did, he did heartily. This made him occasionally rather absurd, sometimes inconsistent, often incomprehensible, but never insincere.

Although the book is long, detailed, and technical, it is not dull reading. A 25-page index enhances its usefulness as a reference.

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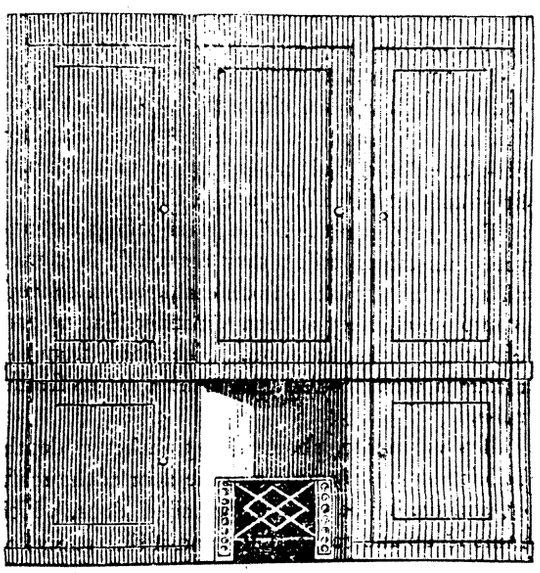
A Varied and Colorful Career

Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford. SANBORN C. BROWN. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979. xiv, 362 pp., illus. $19.95.

Depending upon educational background or perhaps geography, Count Rumford is probably best remembered today for his experimental refutation of the caloric theory of heat or for the revolutionary fireplace design that for 150 years made English homes tolerable if not altogether comfortable. He is also sometimes recalled for what was probably his greatest contribution to science, the founding of the Royal Institution, the professional home of Davy, Faraday, and a distinguished research tradition lasting until the present day. But Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, lived a far more varied and colorful life than these well-known accomplishments would suggest. Soldier of fortune, spy, courtier, social reformer, minister of state, philanthropist, scientist, and inventor, he rose from the obscurity of rural colonial Massachusetts to positions



Rumford's design for a "concealed Kitchen," recommended for a large family. According to Thomas Thomson, one of Rumford's contemporary biographers, "numbers of people . . . fitted up their kitchens according to his models; but I have not heard that his scheme was found to answer in a single instance." On visiting Rumford's own kitchen on this design, Thomson reports, he found that "not one of the utensils had ever been put to use." [From *Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford*]