



1-1-1982

J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years Frank W. Fox

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Recommended Citation

Riggs, Robert E. (1982) "J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years Frank W. Fox," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol22/iss1/15>

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FOX, FRANK W. *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years*. Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book Company, 1980. 689 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Robert E. Riggs, professor of law, J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University. A longer version of this review was published in *Brigham Young University Law Review*, no. 1 (1981), pp. 227–45.

In the field of legal education, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., is identified with a vigorous young law school established in his name at the Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Among students of diplomatic history he is recognized primarily as the author of the *Clark Memorandum on the Monroe Doctrine*, which presaged the renunciation of U.S. military intervention in Latin America during the 1930s. By Utahns, and Mormons generally, he is still well remembered as a towering figure in the Church—counselor to three Church Presidents from 1933 until his death in 1961. Many yet living were once moved by his powerful sermons, inspired and enlightened by his New Testament scholarship, and stimulated (or provoked) by his strong, oft-expressed views on political and social questions. To members of the Church his most important work occurred after 1933. To the country at large, however, his most significant legacy may be nearly three decades of distinguished public service rendered prior to accepting the call of his church.

This biography of J. Reuben Clark, Jr., focuses on the public years outside Utah—from his matriculation as a thirty-two-year-old law student at Columbia University in 1903 to his resignation as United States ambassador to Mexico in 1933. The book, some six-hundred pages plus bibliography and footnotes, is the first part of an official biography authorized by the Clark family and trustees of the Clark estate. Besides a volume by D. Michael Quinn scheduled for publication in 1982 and covering President Clark's service as a General Authority of the Church, the biographical set will also

include three volumes of papers, selected and edited by David H. Yarn, Jr., who is the general editor of the series.

Writing an officially sanctioned biography offers manifest advantages. Most obvious, in this case, was full access to the voluminous Clarkana Papers of Joshua Reuben Clark, Jr., deposited in the Harold B. Lee Library of Brigham Young University. Numbering 140,000 individual items, the Clark Papers are a rich, heretofore untapped source of information on the public and private life of President Clark as well as on historical events of the period. Access to the papers has been highly restricted, with full access thus far granted to only those associated with the present biographical project. The Clark Papers will not be readily available to others until some time after publication of this series. Official sanction of the biography also assured the generous cooperation of President Clark's family and friends, whose records and recollections provided important collateral sources of information.

But writing under official sanction entails constraints as well as advantages. The family, the trustees, and close associates of President Clark necessarily had a deep interest in the substance of the narrative. The author could not write without consciously anticipating their reactions, nor could he publish without their approval. Although their primary concern was to have a competent, scholarly, gracefully-written assessment of the life of J. Reuben Clark, Jr., their views of what was accurate and appropriate had to be taken into account. Judging by the final product, these constraints may have induced the author to leave a few conclusions unstated, or obscurely stated, but otherwise were not unduly confining. If the book does not maintain as sharp and critical a focus as less admiring biographers might choose to adopt, it nevertheless retains a basic integrity—honestly, if always sympathetically, describing and interpreting the events of J. Reuben Clark's life during those highly significant public years.

The style and format of the book suggest an attempt to reach both a popular and a scholarly audience. For the scholar, the work is heavily footnoted to the Clarkana Papers and other primary sources as well as to relevant secondary materials. A very useful index and a twenty-two page bibliographic essay increase the value of the work to students. All of these accoutrements of academia attest that the subject was carefully researched. The style, on the other hand, is pitched to the popular taste. Academic jargon is almost totally absent, enhancing readability. Missing also are the cautious language and the sober, measured analysis of the scholar that sometimes give a work depth and solidity. The author's decision to adopt a style as much

akin to the novelist as to the historian appears to be a conscious choice made in light of the biographical subject matter and the intended audience.

The choice of style undoubtedly improves reader interest. Word pictures, drawn in intimate detail, make events and characters almost come alive. Not content with vivifying overt behavior, the author often reaches into the thoughts and deep emotions of his characters as well. Thus, for example, we find “the moment of supreme triumph” in J. Reuben Clark’s career was a touching personal episode traceable to “an early evening at the embassy in the twilight of autumn” when the “Clarks were preparing to entertain.”

Reuben, resplendent in his Prince Albert, had paused in the *sala* to fumble with an errant cufflink when he looked through the vaulted archway to see what he described as an apparition. It was Luacine Savage Clark, standing in a floor-length blue gown, arranging some calla lilies on the piano—easily at that moment the most beautiful woman on earth.

This, Reuben told himself, was it. For this he had slaved and sacrificed his entire life. . . . Reuben thought of a song, one of his favorites, by Jessie Evans Smith. He listened to Verdi and Wagner any night of the year, but in the few sentimental moments of his life he liked Jessie Evans Smith. . . .

Tears filled the ambassador’s eyes. But this was no way to behave. Tough and cynical Puig Casauranc would be walking through that door any moment, a cigar clamped in his teeth, and it would not do for him to see the U.S. ambassador wiping tears.

The moment passed quickly and Reuben hurried to receive his guests. But he never forgot it. . . . It was the point in life when J. Reuben Clark knew that he had found success.

[Pp. 583–84]

The picture spread before the mind’s eye is appealing, even moving if one is a bit sentimental. This passage may bear a heavier load of affective symbolism than might be expected of four paragraphs selected at random, but it fairly illustrates the lyrical quality of the prose that pervades the entire book.

The prose style has one unfortunate side effect, however, in giving to the interpretation of biographical events a storybook, even fictional, quality that might detract from credibility. A critical reader can scarcely help asking how the biographer knew all this in such intimate detail. The passage just quoted must have been based on something J. Reuben Clark wrote or said. But when, or where? Seventy-four footnotes grace this chapter—but not one comes to the rescue here. A careful reading of the bibliographical essay suggests that the material must have come from interviews with Clark family

members, and perhaps more copious footnoting would have been pedantic. But the shadow which style casts upon credibility remains. And it is all the more unfortunate because it tends to mask the genuine scholarship, the painstaking review and comparison of sources, the care with which the language was chosen by the biographer, all reflecting his vision of reality.

The treatment of historical events adopts much the same style as the more personal episodes with intimately detailed, highly personalized word pictures ("grimy, sweat-stained, travel-worn, unshaven" Mexican *insurrectos*, "laughing, singing, cleaving the air with ear-splitting *vivas*, and happily shooting at anything that moved" [p. 131]). The result is entertaining, with adequate background to understand what J. Reuben Clark is doing, but not always enough to place the events themselves in broad historical context. Indeed, episodes in the narrative frequently appear as vignettes, detailed at the center but fading off into a haze at the edges, lacking sharply defined connections with other events.

Even so, historians who know the context will find many enlightening details in this volume. The Clarkana Papers contain private letters and memoranda dealing with nearly every aspect of Reuben Clark's public career, from life in the solicitor's office under James Brown Scott to the Chamizal boundary negotiations between the United States and Mexico in 1933. At the very least this new source should provide additional illuminating footnotes to the history of the period.

The narrative does not linger on President Clark's early life. A scant seventeen pages cover the period from his birth in Grantsville, Utah, in September 1871 to age thirty-two when he began his formal legal education at Columbia University in 1903.

The book departs somewhat from strict chronological coverage of the subject. The reader who wishes to place J. Reuben Clark's activities and accomplishments in an orderly time sequence may thus encounter some difficulty. As Fox acknowledges, this is not a conventional biography that discusses events in chronological order. Rather it treats the thirty-year period within five themes: (1) education and apprenticeship, covering the period 1903-1910; (2) the lawyer as policymaker, dealing with the years as solicitor of the State Department; (3) the lawyer as crusader, encompassing the development of his ideas on the role of law, diplomacy, and judicial institutions in world affairs and his opposition to the League of Nations and the

World Court; (4) the lawyer as private citizen, including his private law practice, family life, church relationships, and, paradoxically, his unsuccessful ventures into senatorial politics; and, finally, (5) the lawyer as diplomat, 1926–1933. The five themes follow only a rough chronological arrangement, and even within major subdivisions the strict temporal ordering of events does not always have high priority.

What conclusions may be drawn about J. Reuben Clark, Jr., the public servant and diplomat? Even without taking into account the long road from Grantsville to Mexico City, the public career was distinguished. What he achieved he did on his own, without the benefit of personal fortune or family connection. He was sought for government service because of his recognized intelligence, good judgment, integrity, administrative skills, knowledge of Mexican affairs, and willingness to work hard for relatively low government pay.

The biography tells us much about J. Reuben Clark the public figure; it also tells us something about the man. That he was a good man we can have no doubt—whether judged by the standards of contemporary society or by more exacting Christian precepts. He was the very embodiment of the Protestant ethic—honesty, sobriety, thrift, and hard work. He was a man of good will, a loyal friend, a caring—if often absent—husband and father. He adhered strictly to his church's teachings on total abstinence from tobacco and alcoholic beverages, although he was willing to provide them to his guests. Moving to the East at a time when "Mormon" was still virtually synonymous with "polygamy," he chose to identify himself with the faith rather than changing his colors to blend into the Eastern, non-Mormon milieu. When the call came at age sixty-one to devote the rest of his life to demanding responsibilities in his church, he willingly, wholeheartedly accepted.

Never dull, the book tells a story of wide appeal: through ability, determination, and hard work the small-town boy makes good. It is not so much a Mormon success story as an American success story. It is Horatio Alger, with a difference. Reuben Clark began poor enough, and he became comfortably well off, but he stopped short of acquiring the riches that generally rewarded Alger's protagonists. Some might ascribe this to bad luck; but in retrospect the reason is clear: he gave causes and principles higher priority than the sheer acquisition of wealth. Every achievement exacts a price, and the single-minded pursuit of wealth entailed costs that he was unwilling to pay. His public years teach other lessons in costs. He achieved

distinction in his public career and with it came the sincere respect of colleagues and acquaintances. But this was achieved only at the price of tireless effort and unremitting attention to detail. The fourteen-hour day may have appeared legendary to others, but with him it was an ordinary fact of life. The cost also had to be counted in time away from his family, as well as the burdens assumed by Luacine Clark to make the arrangement work. Long periods of semi-activity in the Church were another part of the price exacted by the demands of public service and professional excellence.

The story has a happy ending. He enjoyed a satisfying career; his family turned out well; he returned to the fold of Zion as an honored leader, a pillar of strength and rectitude among the Saints. In one sense his life is an object lesson in the rewards of Christian virtue. It is also a study in the consequences of human choice. No one can do every good thing. Time and attention are limited resources. Time devoted to one pursuit cannot simultaneously be devoted to another. Viewed on a broad canvas, the choices made by J. Reuben Clark in public and private life led to success and personal fulfillment. Inexorably, however, the choice to do some things implied a choice not to do other good things. Not everyone would care to make the same choices. Some would shrink from the hard work. Others might hesitate to give up precious family associations or call for such sacrifice from family members. Still others would be unwilling to leave so little room for church activity and association for so long a period of time. With benefit of hindsight, J. Reuben Clark might have done some things differently. But who would care to fault him for the choices he made? In such matters each must answer for himself and not for another. In his case the outcome suggests that good choices must have been made along the way.

The book unquestionably deserves to be taken seriously as biography. In six-hundred pages it provides an informed basis for appraising the character and contributions of its subject against the background of the times in which he lived. The author makes judgments, but he also invites the reader to make them. As I perused the pages of the book, I found myself continually appraising Reuben Clark the public servant, the diplomat, the lawyer, the family man, the church man, the man. For me, the book has one further quality of good biography: it evoked serious personal introspection. As I looked for insights into the life of J. Reuben Clark, I also gained perspective on my own.