Rethinking the 1920s: Historians and Changing Perspectives

The decade of the 1920s continues to fascinate historians. New works dealing with social and cultural history have supplemented the more traditional focus on political history to provide us with a fuller and more well-rounded portrait of a society where class, ethnic, racial, regional, political, and cultural divisions remained quite sharp.


Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), a study of Muncie, Indiana, has proven indispensable to historians studying social, economic and cultural changes during the decade.


Recently, historians have put great stress on the role that consumption and consumerism have played in American history. For a book that relates this notion to the working class, see Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). During the 1920s, department stores reached their zenith as downtown institutions. For a far reaching treatment, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).


The Ku Klux Klan attracted those uneasy with the more assertive role of African Americans, Catholics, and Jews as well as those uncomfortable with the rapid pace of social change in the United States. Numerous books have been written about the Klan and some may have exaggerated the influence of an organization which reached its peak in the early 1920s. There is no adequate overall history of the 1920s Klan, but David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965) provides an encyclopedic account as does Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach, right, watching agents pour liquor into a sewer following a raid during prohibition, 1921. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-123257.)


The Universal Negro Improvement Association headed by Marcus Garvey won significant support from African Americans in the early 1920s. Books that discuss various aspects of the organization...


American writing flourished during the 1920s and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1924) remains indispensable for an understanding of the decade. While the works of Willa Cather, T. S. Eliot, Theodore Dreiser and Ernest Hemingway are vital, the best literary guide to the decade is the quartet of novels by Sinclair Lewis: *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927). Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Norton, 1934) is a valuable memoir.

Lastly, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1954) remains a useful guide to an event that ushered in a totally different decade. Though the 1930s revolutionized many aspects of American life, it was the 1920s that previewed the type of society which emerged by the 1950s. But because so many countervailing trends existed simultaneously, the 1920s will continue to generate controversy and provoke debates about its meaning.

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