Michael Rosenthal pens first-ever biography of Nicholas Butler

The Professor with a Pencil for Miraculous Stories

Profile

Excerpts from one of Columbia's former presidents, Nicholas Butler Miraculous, called the biography a "superb close-up" of a "supremely confident man."

Michael Rosenthal would answer some questions about the difficulties he had encountered in his life and career. He would be happy to have a conversational companion. What would he miss most and least about civilization? What would he like to have as his conversational companion? What would be the best book ever written about him?

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president

The Columbia Butler knew as an undergraduate: Although the establishment of the faculty of political science in 1900 represented the first stage in Barnard's plan to raise the college 'from the level of an elementary school to that of a grand institution of higher learning,' Columbia was still, during Butler's undergraduate days, essential 'a school for small children.'

The Columbia Butler knew as an undergraduate had attracted the best of all possible minds when developed in the twentieth century, and the United States could look forward under Butler's leadership to a university of international distinction. In its lavishness and gravity, the inauguration became in effect a national occasion, not merely a parochial gesture of self-congratulation. It was less Columbia itself than the importance of the American university that was being acknowledged.

Butler's shepherding of Columbia through the depression years:

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president, the president of the world's largest university, and the international spokesman and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Butler Library's rare book collection was reassuring. Michael Rosenthal was happy to have a conversational companion who would be Yeats—and for the same reason of sheer excellence.

The Amazing Career of the Redoubtable Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), which hit the shelves Jan. 10. Perhaps not coincidentally, Baden-Powell and Butler share quite a few traits. Both were creatures of the Edwardian era; both were known as educational innovators; and both had a gift for "self-mythologizing and building up a legend about themselves during their lifetime," Rosenthal says.

He adds that he found Butler's story particularly compelling as he wondered how a man once touted as "the most decorated person in the world" could today be known to so few people.

Nicholas Butler achieved instant oblivion in a way that is quite remarkable, but not easily understandable," marvs Rosenthal. "The man was the president of a major university—this one. He ran for the presidency of the United States, won the Nobel Peace Prize, and dominated to some degree the world stage for 44 years. Now this is the first real book ever written about him."

An early review in the New Yorker observed by Patricia O'Toole, a biographer of Teddy Roosevelt, who named Butler Nicholas Miraculous, called the biography "a superb close-up of a supremely confident man."

"Well, we can see that Nicholas Butler was nothing if not a prolific writer," agrees Rosenthal. "He was a prolific publisher of articles and tracts and didn't hesitate to write down what amounted to press releases about his doings. I certainly had no shortage of materials on which to base the biography."

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president, the president of the world's largest university, and the international spokesman and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which Butler chaired, and 144 volumes of miscellaneous clippings.

"There were times when I really wasn't sure I'd be able to pull it into a compelling, comprehensive narrative," recalls the professor. "But then I'd remind myself that I wasn't in any hurry—I wasn't going anywhere, and Butler certainly wasn't. And then I'd carry on."

Now that Rosenthal has reviewed the American President, he says he's been "tickled Rosenthal, with his coaching college football to the Valley. He recently became the chair of Columbia's board of trustees. Campbell's odyssey from coaching college football to an academic chair tickles Rosenthal, with his penchant for unusual stories. It's not all that frequently that you find a football coach who is sufficiently interested in the academic side of things to endow a chair," he notes. "And I knew him when he was a coach, so that makes me particularly pleased to have this honor."

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Butler's shepherding of Columbia through the depression years:

Fortunately, the one part of the university least affected by the Depression was the quality of the faculty. As jobs were scarcer and competitive offers rarer, the faculty excellence that Butler had helped stock during the previous two decades tended not to migrate elsewhere. There were departures, of course, but students coming to Morningside during this time continued to be taught by extraordinary people.

In addition, Columbia retained some of its brilliant graduate students who blossomed into distinction in the 1930s, such men as the literary critic Lionel Trilling, the cultural historian Jacques Barzun, the art critic Meyer Schapiro, and

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president

Butler's "miraculous" performance as Columbia's president, the president of the world's largest university, and the international spokesman and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—reinforced one another at every turn, Butler gloated in a memo of a notion being recognized as much more than a mere academic. For Americans, whose country was beginning to demonstrate its economic power, the image of a university president who had attracted the best of all possible minds when developed in the twentieth century, and the United States could look forward under Butler's leadership to a university of international distinction. In its lavishness and gravity, the inauguration became in effect a national occasion, not merely a parochial gesture of self-congratulation. It was less Columbia itself than the importance of the American university that was being acknowledged.

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