

Dean Robb: An Unlikely Radical

Matthew Z. Robb

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“The hottest place in hell is reserved for those who in time of moral crisis remained neutral.” This favorite quotation of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., sometimes attributed to the Italian poet, Dante, aptly describes the life of the notable labor and civil rights attorney, Dean Robb.

Dean Rob: An Unlikely Radical is a breezy and intriguing story of how a Presbyterian farm boy from Southern Illinois grew up to be an effective social activist lawyer, first in Detroit and then nationally. The book covers roughly the first half of the life of Dean Robb. The story is well written and organized by Matthew Z. Robb, the youngest of Robb’s five children. Reading the book is like sitting with Dean over several drinks, listening to him regale anyone who will listen with stories of significant events in his life and the life of the State of Michigan and of the United States.

Dean Robb grew up on a farm near Pinckneyville, Illinois, in what is called the “Little Egypt” section of the state due to its proximity to the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The author has captured the understated bluntness of his father’s speech, as evidenced when he describes the farmers of his youth, saying, “These farmers were fiercely property-oriented. They even treated their women and children as possessions to some extent.”

The book follows Dean Robb through the University of Illinois, a brief stint in the Navy during WWII and on to work at Dodge House, a community center run by the Presbyterian Church in Detroit. In his early days in Detroit, Dean was intent on becoming a minister. After a failed campaign to place a fair employment practices bill on the ballot, Dean found the church too cautious. “The fair employment campaign was a bitter pill to swallow and taught me a hard-learned lesson: being right isn’t enough. To effect change you need to be right, both morally and technically.”

As Dean tells his story with his son, Matt as scribe, no matter what he is involved in he has but one overall goal: to effect change to make this a better and more just society. While still in law school he helps organize an effort to integrate a lunch counter near the school. That story was but a harbinger of what was to come later in his life.

Throughout the book, Dean Robb remains true to his style. He is a straight-talking, blunt, irreverent speaker of the truth as he sees it. Describing a judge before whom he appeared, he says: “To top things off, the case was to come before Judge Szmanski, a notoriously conservative, mean political animal.” As Dean observes, a good trial lawyer is never intimidated! And yet, family life is another story; his recollection of the end of his first marriage is both startling candid and tender.

The text unfortunately suffers from inadequate copy editing, and that should be addressed in any reissued versions. Regardless, Matt Robb has done well in wrenching an informative and entertaining encomium from his father, Dean Robb, who has lived a full and engaged life. *An Unlikely Radical* received the Indie Excellence Award for best historical biography in 2011.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (August 13, 2012)

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