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Review: Taft 2012, by Jason Heller [1]

Written by **Chris Snowdon** [2] | Friday 14 September 2012

Two things did I know about William Howard Taft before reading this book. Firstly, in 1903, as governor of the Philippines, he opposed a ban on the sale of opium. Secondly, in 1913, as the 27th president of the USA, he vetoed the Webb-Kenyon Act which would have banned the transportation of alcohol from into dry states. A liberal man in age of puritanism, Taft?s resistance was in vain. Opium was banned in the Philippines in 1908 and the Senate overrode his veto of Webb-Kenyon Act, paving the way for national prohibition followed seven years later.

After reading this novel, Jason Heller?s first, I am not sure I know much more about this one-term president. He was a fat man, that much is amply emphasised. He had a moustache, like so did many gentlemen of the Gilded Age. And he would have fitted into the world of 2012 with surprising ease.

Taft died in 1930 in the bosom of his family, but that was only in real life. In ?Taft 2012?, he mysteriously disappeared in 1913 and reappeared still more mysteriously in November 2011, just in time to bring some traditional American values to the current presidential election. His re-emergence leads to some inevitable fish-out-of-water confusions from the Crocodile Dundee school of comedy. There are various battles with technology, which Taft wins with remarkable ease for a man of 155. He enjoys some punk rock. He is unfazed by his descendent marrying a black man. He is soundly opposed to the War on Drugs.

Heller sees Taft?s main attribute as being his reluctance to hold political office. He may be right, but even if not wanting to be president is an excellent qualification for the job, having no policies is not, and Heller?s Taft has little of substance to say. He is neither appalled nor delighted to see what has happened to his country. He is just a bit confused, an affable man who is out of his depth and knows it. He sees no reason why he should run as president in 2012, and the reader has to agree, but the invitations rain in nonetheless. Thanks to the internet, a minor movement of ?Tafties? attempts to goad him back towards the White House. Heller?s depiction of the madness of the Twitter crowd is well-observed, gently parodying the shallowness of the medium while showing Taft to be just another celebrity freak on the social networking conveyor belt.

It may be churlish to lay the charge of unrealism at a time travel yarn, but the ease with Taft fits into modern day liberal America strains credibility. This would matter less if the novel had the teeth to fulfill its promise. Instead, it is a political satire with very little satire and hardly any politics. Taft has nothing of significance to say about American foreign policy, abortion, Obamacare, the economy or how to reunite a divided country. He is an everyman with enough wisdom to know that he doesn?t have the answers, but his reluctance to stir things up wastes an interesting premise. Heller clearly sees Taft as the kind of middle

ground, third way candidate his country supposedly needs. He is, as his fictional grand-daughter tells him, ?conservative yet forward-thinking, pro-business yet pro-regulation, principled yet open to compromise?, but which politician does not describe themselves in these bland terms? Certainly not Mitt Romney.

The closing pages see something of a twist in the tale, but the target Heller takes aim at is too trivial to justify the effort of resurrecting a dead president, as if Churchill came back from the dead to complain about chewing gum. In the end, Taft 2012 is a perfectly enjoyable bit of fun which is as disposable as its title destines it to be.

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