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Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, and the Golden Gate Bridge

Ebner H. Michael

Lake Forest College, ebner@lakeforest.edu

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Review by: Michael H. Ebner

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Paying the Toll: Local Power, Regional Politics, and the Golden Gate Bridge. By Louise Nelson Dyble. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. vi + 294 pp. \$39.95)

Louise Nelson Dyble has approached a significant topic—the Golden Gate Bridge—to provide readers with an invaluable historical narrative. Although *Paying the Toll* possesses multiple dimensions, more than anything else it makes a superb contribution to the history of American public policy. Scholars interested in related sub-fields—transportation, infrastructure, urbanism, state building, public finance, and politics among them—should also find the book instructive. Dyble possesses a firm grasp of current scholarship, drawing upon work written by historians, political scientists, and legal scholars. Her in-depth discussion of special districts during the course of the twentieth century and how they played out is itself worthy of the price of admission.

The basic storyline is organized chronologically. The origins of the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District date to 1923. The next consequential step in this narrative dates to 1937 with the completion of the heralded bridge. Then, in spite of sustained, decades-long efforts to terminate or circumscribe the district's expansive authority, to this day it remains very much in place.

The backstory of the district and its bridge furnish the essence of this richly documented and well-narrated book. Dyble whets our appetite at the outset by explaining the obstacles placed

in her path upon requesting access to the vast trove of public records. As readers will readily discover, her perseverance has yielded a richly textured analysis, and she has succeeded in amalgamating the policy issues embedded in special districts and the procession of personalities who played consequential roles. Along the way we find ourselves in the company of James Adam (long-time general manager of the district), Russell G. Cone (district engineer), Jack McCarthy (foremost legislative critic of the district), and Joseph B. Strauss (a major figure in the original bridge design). Embedded in the narrative are intriguing episodes, including the formation of BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit), which involved both political chicanery and soaring aspirations.

As I read this fine book, I found myself wishing for more. Foremost, Dyble needed to provide readers with a fuller analysis—using easy-to-construct time series drawn from census statistics arranged in tables, charts, or graphs—of shifting population patterns in the counties served by the Golden Gate district. Where she does attend to such matters, it is rather perfunctory as well as fleeting. I also yearned for a comparative context (thinking of Robert Moses), which might have added essential context to comparable special districts elsewhere. The driving force in the development of transportation infrastructure in metropolitan New York City for almost fifty years, running along a chronologically parallel track to the Golden Gate district, Moses barely exerts an influence on the narrative of *Paying the Toll* (ultimately Moses was brought down, while the Golden Gate district survived). Also worthy of further attention is the rich historical literature assaying the professionalization of the engineering profession in the United States during the twentieth century; books by Monte Calvert and Edward T. Layton, Jr., come to mind.

Paying the Toll has, unquestionably, added an invaluable chapter to historical scholarship. It is deeply researched, very well organized, and well narrated. Not only did I learn a great deal from Louise Nelson Dyble but I thoroughly enjoyed my reading assignment.

Lake Forest College

MICHAEL H. EBNER