

Man of Tomorrow

The Relentless Life of Jerry Brown

By Jim Newton



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The title of journalist Jim Newton's fine new biography, *Man of Tomorrow*, scarcely mentioned in the book, cannot capture Jerry Brown in his fullness. As Newton himself points out, Brown's thinking was strongly influenced by a rigorous Jesuit education, and Brown "walked in the paths of tradition." He strongly believed in limits to the role of government (and to government spending). Brown told William F. Buckley on *Firing Line*, "Freedom is totally impossible without limits, without structure." While Brown did not believe government was the solution to every problem, he believed government could play a positive role and make the lives of Californians better. Accepting the limits of government and accepting the active and positive role government can play may make Brown seem a man of contradictions in our politically polarized time. In fact, Brown's ability to integrate both ideas enabled him to govern our unruly state with increasing success as he matured politically.

At times, Brown seems less a man of tomorrow than a man out of synch. About Brown in 1967, Newton writes: "Too young, too skeptical, too liberal to join up with Reagan's team, too old, too straight and too Catholic to enjoy the counterculture, he was outside the poles staked out...."

Brown has been called a visionary, yet he rejects the label, preferring "Catholic skeptic enthusiast ... and a romantic." Yet "romantic" is a word pointing in many directions, towards tomorrow, towards the past, towards chivalry, towards utopia, and in the waspish words of the smart aleck journalist Mike Royko, towards moonbeams. All this is to say that no substantive label can begin to do justice to Brown.

The book's subtitle, "The Relentless Life of Jerry Brown," is more illuminating, because the adjective "relentless" points towards a surging and churning process, towards Brown's ambition, his striving, his inquiring mind, his occasionally contrarian and harsh streak, and his sense of obligation and commitment. An editor might have suggested another subtitle, "The Questing Life of Jerry Brown."

The relentlessness of Brown's quest for public office is recounted in detail by Newton: trustee to the Los Angeles Community College Board (1969), Secretary of State (1970), Chair of the California Democratic Party (1989), Mayor of Oakland (1998), Attorney General (2006), and four terms as Governor (1974, 1978, 2010, 2014). And Brown also campaigned for president. Brown's comment about the Secretary of

State office, “it was a path,” shows the relentlessness of the quest.

While Brown may have been an ascetic, slept on a futon, and studied Zen, his career path came with several advantages. As the son of another great California governor, he had the advantage of name recognition. And there were perks. After Yale Law School, and thanks to his father’s connections, Brown clerked for the estimable Justice Mathew Tobriner, becoming the first Tobriner clerk to fail the bar. Brown studied again for the bar in the spaciousness of the governor’s mansion. Brown also had a loving and supportive family. Relocating to Los Angeles, Brown moved into a “modest Laurel Canyon home, purchased with help from his parents.”

Man of Tomorrow raises a question for this reader: Is California governable? Reminding us why people refer to “California Crazy,” Newton retells California’s event-driven political history from mid-20th century to the present with authority and verve: the Chessman execution (1960), the Rumford Fair Housing Act (1963), the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (1964), Proposition 14 (1964 — a man’s home is his castle), Vietnam War protests (1964-1971), the Watts Riots and the McCone Commission Report (1965), the Summer of Love (1967), LSD and The Grateful Dead, Charles Manson (1969), the Zodiac Killer (late 60’s, early 70’s), Patty Hearst’s kidnapping and the Symbionese Liberation Front (1974), Proposition 13 (1978 — property tax reduction), People’s Temple (1978), the assassination of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk (1978), Diablo Canyon nuclear power protests (1981), AIDS, the Loma Prieta earthquake (1989), the California medfly attack (1989), Rodney King and Los Angeles riots (1992), Proposition 187 (1994 — Save our State/no public benefits for immigrants), Three Strikes law (1994), and O.J. Simpson’s long half-time ride along Southern

California’s freeways (1994). The book also includes an interesting, if tangential, chapter on California culture, circa 1965, explaining in a general way that California was a changing place. One benefit of Newton’s romp through recent California history is to remind us how much politics is affected by contingent events, and how important fresh, resilient, nimble, and independent thinking is for effective political leadership.

The Jerry Brown case suggests the answer to the question about California’s governability is a guardedly optimistic “yes.” During Brown’s return to power, faced with a crushing budget shortfall, he performed the ultimate hat trick, convincing Californians of the need for limits, i.e., painful budget cuts, and the need for new taxes. He put the question of taxes to the California electorate, demonstrating fiscal responsibility and faith in voters. Restoring California’s economic and budgetary health was his primary contribution to governability. In the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., “[t]axes are the price we pay for civilization.”

From the Santa Barbara oil spill to the present, Brown consistently expressed concern about the environment. California’s forests, waters, and clean air are invaluable California assets, and Brown led on the issue of climate change, which he saw as an existential threat, not just to California, but to humankind.

Newton reminds us of President Trump’s visit to the ashes of Paradise, which the President referred to as Pleasure, while Brown looked down and muttered “Paradise.” While the President spoke about the need to rake forest floors, which are mostly located on federal lands in California, Brown worried more about California’s changing climate, chronic droughts, and water shortage.

Throughout his four terms as governor, Brown advanced the policy of diversity. By

the time he finished his governorship in 2019, “Brown had appointed more than a third of all the sitting judges in California.” More than 50% were women, and approximately 40% were nonwhite. The ill-starred Chief Justice Rose Bird was not only the first woman to serve on the California Supreme Court, she was also the first woman to serve in a governor’s California State Cabinet. “The only way a person can get a job in this administration,” Brown once joked, “is if he’s a poverty lawyer, a kook, or a priest who was with Cesar Chavez.”

Newton devotes a chapter to Brown as “leader of the resistance.” In striking ways, Brown’s policy orientations ran counter to national leadership, significantly so, in his fourth and last term: as a believer in the science of climate change, as one who believed in the value of diversity, and as one who worked well with the demographic change that brought Hispanics to power in California. Nationally, the Republican Party disavowed environmental protection as an important party value and did not harness the political energies of diversity. California, however, developed its own political identity, and Brown’s values and policies generally meshed well with the politics of the predominantly Democratic California electorate.

From a hip young governor to a mature politician, married, with a telegenic family dog, Brown grew with the times, along with California. Newton concludes, “Brown had a knack for suiting California and being well suited to it. In the 1970s, California was a wacky and uncertain place, and Brown seemed carved from it, with his refusal to adapt to political norms, his mattress on the floor, his rock-star girlfriend. By the time he returned, both he and his state had matured.” Michael Kinsley said it differently: “Jerry Brown hasn’t gone mainstream (or at least not much),” wrote Kinsley, “but mainstream has gone Jerry Brown.”

In the era of post-World War II euphoria, prosperity, and growth, Governor Pat Brown helped build our system of higher education and our waterways. Romantic perhaps, Governor Jerry Brown was nevertheless able to negotiate California politics in an era of limits, balancing budgets, reducing prison populations, promoting “small is beautiful,” and concern for the environment. Different men for different times, both governors were devoted civil servants who had a deep attachment to and deep family roots in our state. Jerry Brown has retired to the ancestral family property in Colusa County, a place of the heart to which he seems to have a near mystical connection.

Newton’s biography is favorable to and admiring of Brown, even as he points out unresolved issues facing the state after Brown: precarious state retirement systems, homelessness, housing shortages, rail system and water tunnel projects in limbo, forest fires, drought, unhappy farmers, complaints California is not business friendly, schools strapped for funding, and a state split vertically between the liberal coast anchored by San Francisco and Los Angeles and the conservative inland areas.

Another fine biography of Brown, written by Miriam Pawel, appeared last year: *The Browns of California: The Family Dynasty that Transformed a State and Shaped a Nation*. Pawel told the multi-generational story of the Brown family, from the mid-19th century, when Brown’s great-grandfather August Schuckman immigrated, through future generations, up to present-day California. Newton’s focus is different, because Brown is front and center. And there is no better guide to California politics than Newton, who knows the minutiae and sees the large themes. Newton has already written biographies of two other eminent Californians, Earl Warren and Leon Panetta, and the biography of Brown will be enjoyable reading for anyone interested in California politics and politicians.