Preface

It is MY Purpose in the following pages to relate in some detail the career through 1912 of one of the more remarkable political personalities in American history. George W. Norris was an unobtrusive man. He did not attract attention because of the power of his personality, his oratory, demagoguery, control of a machine, or position as spokesman for a particular point of view or powerful vested interest. Yet he was a commanding figure in both houses of the Congress and in his home state of Nebraska.

While some individuals command attention because they rise above their backgrounds to positions of political prominence, and others, from privileged backgrounds, seek to understand the problems and viewpoints of their constituents, Norris fitted neither pattern. Like Lincoln he was an uncommon common man. He chose the simple and the unpretentious, and was more at home in the parlor than in the drawing room. He preferred small town America; Main Street was always more attractive than Connecticut or Fifth Avenue. Yet he could understand and sympathize with the common man whether he lived on a windswept Nebraska farm, in Beaver City or McCook, Nebraska, or in the slum sections of Omaha. America to him was Nebraska writ large. And when he examined the world beyond the United States, his angle of vision remained the same. He believed that people were primary, that property rights, while important, were never superior to personal liberties, and that a high sense of moral values should characterize the behavior of men in government, business, or any other area of human endeavor. His outlook could be summed up in the classic advice of a homesteader to his children: "Tell the truth, stay out of debt, don't be afraid of work, and remember when you pray that God helps those that help themselves." In the context of American thought, such views automatically classified Norris as a nineteenth-century liberal in the Jeffersonian tradition. And indeed he was, though he never read Jefferson or placed Jefferson, let alone Lincoln, among his patron saints.

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But Norris was also something more. He was one of the best parliamentarians in American political history. He was fortunate in that his sparse small town education, while somewhat scanty in cultural content, stressed rhetoric and debate. From his earliest years in school he was continually exposed to parliamentary procedure, the knowledge which in later years enabled him to defeat "Uncle Joe" Cannon, win the Muscles Shoals fight, and achieve the remarkable record which made him one of the most useful legislators in American history. That he did all of these things almost singlehandedly is extraordinary in an age when party organization, machine rule, and pressure politics were expanding their influence and causing increased public and scholarly scrutiny.

As he came to political maturity the welfare state was being forged. Norris was not interested in building the power of the central government per se. But if privilege was in any way extorting undue profits from people (and people, to Norris, were the neighborly folks, not necessarily native-born Americans, he knew in Beaver City and McCook), he would not hesitate to use federal power to curb or supersede it. Moreover, his small town background helped him to understand that the Industrial Revolution, with which he never came in direct contact, had created a national economy and that only centralized authority could cope with it. The railroad, the mortgage loan business, and the land speculation of his environment made him aware that people's lives could be vitally affected by factors and forces in other parts of the state or nation, by problems not primarily local or regional in character.

As a political personality, though a stalwart Republican in his younger days, he quickly and naturally fell in step with the policies of Theodore Roosevelt, who was president when Norris reached Washington, D.C. His career in Nebraska during the Populist revolt had paved the way for his insurgency and later progressivism. He was not an intellectual. He was not given to philosophizing about political theory or the role of government. He was not one to absorb political history or the biographies of prominent Americans.

History for George Norris began with the Civil War, which claimed the life of his only brother, and continued on through the New Deal into World War II. It paralleled his life span and served as his frame of reference. Rooted in nineteenth-century values and traditions, he played a role in meeting most of the challenges of the first half of the twentieth century. And like most American liberals, he was a pragmatist. He met issues as they arose and was concerned with their effect on people everywhere. If curbing privilege meant increasing the

power of the federal government, he would support such measures. If it meant government supervision, development, or control of natural resources in the interests of all the people, he would favor this as well.

In this book I have tried to present, chiefly from manuscript and other primary sources, a biography that will do justice to the man. To understand the career of a political personality who was a master of legislative process necessitates careful attention to detail—to parliamentary procedure, to bills and amendments to bills, to particular clauses in bills, to debate—in short, to the daily routine of a member of Congress. I have not tried to force any pattern upon my subject. Rather, I have tried to write concretely, to pay attention to significant details, to record observations, and to avoid excessive generalizing. Many generalizations relevant to recent American history are not based on adequate primary research and consequently are continually being revised or rejected. More valid ones, I think, will emerge after numerous studies in depth, such as that attempted in this volume, have been made.

When I began this biography I had few preconceived notions about George Norris. Working through the huge collection of his papers in the Library of Congress, processing a segment of them for the Manuscripts Division, examining other relevant collections, reading the Congressional Record, and doing all the other research such a study entails convinced me that I was fortunate in my continual contact with the career of an admirable person who was also one of the great men of our recent history. This volume studies Norris' career through the campaign of 1912 which witnessed his election to the United States Senate. In a concluding volume I intend to complete his biography.

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