

PREFACE

Alfred E. Smith's political career spanned a period of tremendous change, and the still greater changes that have occurred since his death in 1944 have made the world of Al Smith seem rather quaint and somewhat remote to someone in the 1980s. Yet, nearly forty years after his death – and more than fifty years after he reached his political prime – Al Smith still merits our attention. As a leading urban progressive, an illustrious governor of New York, and the first serious Roman Catholic presidential nominee, he remains a figure of undeniable historical significance.

Smith's nomination for the presidency by the Democratic Party in 1928 proved to be the climax of his political career. He went on to suffer a crushing defeat in November, after which his political fortunes and influence steadily declined. The events of the 1928 presidential campaign have received extensive treatment many times, and so they are not reviewed in this book. The story of Smith's role in national politics before June, 1928, however, has not been adequately told, and that is what this book attempts to do.

My own interest in Al Smith developed in an indirect fashion. I had begun to study, as a possible dissertation topic in the mid-1960s, William Gibbs McAdoo, for whom there was – and is – no adequate biography, when my attention was diverted to Smith. I realized that my fascination with the division within the Democratic Party of the 1920s could be served even better by focusing on Al Smith, who was the more dynamic figure, and whose role in national politics had not been satisfactorily limned.

I was not, I will confess, particularly sympathetic to Smith when I began the research that resulted in this book. In many ways – background, religion, and personality – he and I have nothing in common. Over the years, though, I got to know Al Smith, his East Side neighborhood, his life, his career, and his thinking quite well, and so I developed a genuine affection for him. More to the point, I also developed a warm admiration for his abilities and his achievements. This has perhaps colored some of my interpretations of Smith, but not unduly I believe.

In an earlier era, Smith probably could not have become a national figure because of who he was; in a later one, his background would not have been particularly remarkable but his personal "image" probably would have kept him from being nominated for the presidency. This book explores why Smith's "availability" during the 1920s, falling as it did between those two eras, had such meaning then and continues to be important today.

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