Gov. Brown’s biographer booked for Sac State lecture

Chuck McFadden has written the first biography of Gov. Edmund G. “Jerry” Brown Jr. in 30 years and is surprised it has taken so long for someone to do it.

“He’s a guy who uses Latin phrases in his political speeches,” says McFadden. “He spent a month in Calcutta with Mother Teresa at the Home for the Dying. He came back to California after that and became chairman of the California Democratic Party. He studied to be a Jesuit priest and became the pothole-filling mayor of Oakland. Who wouldn’t want to write a biography of a guy like that?”

McFadden will discuss the life and times of California’s two-time governor and share stories from the just-published, and unauthorized, Trailblazer: A Biography of Jerry Brown ($29.95, University of California Press, 248 pages) at 3 p.m. Wednesday, April 17, in the University Library Gallery. His talk is free and open to the public.

In the early 1970s, McFadden was a reporter assigned to the Associated Press’ Capitol bureau in Sacramento. Jerry Brown was then California’s secretary of state under Gov. Ronald Reagan.

“Jerry was very media-conscious, but he was secretary of state, a very obscure office, and here we were in 1974, and the whole country is mesmerized by the Watergate scandal,” McFadden says. “And here we were, 70 members of the Capitol press corps in Sacramento, and we weren’t getting any part of the scandal of the century. Jerry Brown wasn’t getting any part of it, either.”

And then Brown’s staff discovered that the law partner of President Richard M. Nixon’s private attorney in California had falsely notarized documents to earn Nixon a hefty tax credit for donating his vice presidential papers to the Library of Congress.

“So what did Jerry do? At the top of his lungs, he revoked the notary public’s license,” McFadden says. “How do you turn such a picayune piece of trivia into a statewide, headline-grabbing story? Remember, there were 70 political reporters eager for a piece of the Watergate action. It wasn’t directly connected, but it was a little piece of Nixon chicanery, the only thing Jerry could grab hold of. And we reporters wrote the (dickens) out of that story. We knew we were being had, but nonetheless we wrote it, chuckling at our typewriters.”
Brown would be elected California’s 34th governor in November 1974, and reelected in 1978. He refused to live in the Governor’s Mansion and got an apartment near the Capitol. He chose a 1974 Plymouth Satellite sedan over a state-issued limousine. His love life made headlines around the country: Pop singer Linda Ronstadt was a longtime girlfriend. And a bemused Mike Royko, a Chicago newspaper columnist who followed Brown’s political career, nicknamed him “Governor Moonbeam.”

Brown, 75, ran unsuccessfully for president in 1976, 1980 and 1992, but, in 2010, he defeated Republican candidate Meg Whitman to become California’s 39th governor.

McFadden ran into Brown at a public function as he was writing *Trailblazer* and requested an interview, to which Brown agreed.

“But I never did get to talk to Jerry and get his perspective on his life, which I dearly would like to have done,” says McFadden, who relied in part on the memories of fellow journalists who covered Brown over the years. “This is a guy of amazing contradictions. I would argue that he’s the most interesting politician in California history.”

Friends of the Library’s Author Lecture Series is sponsored by the University Library and the Library Gallery, the Hornet Bookstore and Capital Public Radio. For more information on the series, contact Sally Hitchcock at (916) 278-5954 or hitchcoc@saclink.csus.edu. For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156.

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