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Article Summary: Bryan, the most influential Democrat of his time, fascinates historians even though he never won a presidential election. Most recent scholars agree that he had a sincere confidence in the ability of the people to govern themselves.

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Photographs / Images: William Jennings Bryan, President William McKinley, lapel pin portraying Bryan in a tiny coffin with the slogan "Free Silver Knocked Him Out," Mary Baird Bryan, caricature of Bryan at the Democratic Convention (*Judge*, June 6, 1908), "transparency" from the 1896 campaign: "Gold standard and 10 cent corn! How do you like it!"

William Jennings Bryan and the HISTORIANS

By Robert W. Cherny

Almost a hundred years ago, on November 3, 1896, the voters of the United States decided the closely fought presidential contest between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. Bryan got almost 6 1/2 million votes, more than any previous candidate, and he carried twenty-two of the forty-five states. McKinley, however, received more than 7 million votes, and the twenty-three states that he carried gave him a large majority in the electoral college. Republicans had usually enjoyed electoral college majorities from 1860 onward, but McKinley's victory marked the first time in twenty-four years that a Republican received a popular majority. For more than twenty years, the national parties had been stalemated as neither commanded a working majority, but McKinley's victory initiated a third of a century of Republican dominance in national politics. Bryan lost the presidency twice more and is probably most often remembered today as one of the great losers in American politics.

Though McKinley won at the polls in 1896 and 1900, by a different measure of success—the linear feet of shelf space in university libraries—Bryan wins by a sizeable margin, probably two to one in most universities, especially if the large stack of McKinley assassination memorial books are omitted from the count. Leaving aside campaign biographies and assassination memorials, there have been twelve book-length studies of

McKinley, comprising thirteen volumes. Bryan, however, has been the subject of twenty-one book-length studies, comprising twenty-three volumes—nearly a two to one margin over McKinley.¹

What explains historians' fascination with Bryan? In part, it has to do with longevity. McKinley was the most important leader of his party for only five years—and, even then, he was repeatedly represented (wrongly, historians now know) as merely the puppet of Mark Hanna. By contrast, Bryan captured his party's presidential nomination at the age of thirty-six and remained the single most important leader of his party for the next sixteen years—a length of time almost without parallel among American party leaders. Even after 1912, he remained among a handful of the most influential Democrats until his death thirteen years later.

The works on Bryan fall into four major categories: (1) works written during Bryan's heyday in politics; (2) treatments published in the 1920s and 1930s, most of them quite favorable toward Bryan; (3) a highly critical scholarly analysis that became prominent from the late 1940s until the early 1960s, and (4) a more balanced view, beginning about 1960 and continuing through recent studies of the Wilson administration. Each will be sampled briefly. As it turns out, historians' views on Bryan sometimes give us interesting insights into the concerns and contexts of the historians.

Of the studies of Bryan's life written during his political heyday, most were written as campaign biographies. Most are best forgotten, although those by

Mary Baird Bryan, his wife, and Richard Melcalfe, a close political associate, include useful information.² Of the whole set of treatments before the 1920s, perhaps the most unusual is Vachel Lindsay's long poem recounting the 1896 campaign and election, which appears elsewhere in this issue. Lindsay's attraction to Bryan was shared by some of the leading scholars of the day, especially some of those identified as the Progressive historians.³

Vernon Parrington, whose *Main Currents in American Thought* has served as the exemplar for the Progressive historians' paradigm, voted for Bryan in 1896 and also took a minor part in Populist politics in Kansas during the 1890s.⁴ He did not complete the section on Bryan that he had planned for *Main Currents in American Thought*, but its intended title, "William Jennings Bryan and the Last Battle," suggests that he probably intended to depict Bryan as the last voice for the agrarian radicalism that Parrington had depicted as central to the long-term struggle between the forces he labeled "democracy" and "plutocracy."⁵

Frederick Jackson Turner, on the other hand, who also identified the western frontier as a source for democracy and individualism, voted for McKinley in 1896 and probably in 1900, although he did support Bryan in 1908.⁶ Turner's support for McKinley seems to have stemmed in part from his family's traditional Republicanism and in part from a sense that frontier-bred individualism was threatened by Populist and Bryanite demands for what Turner, in 1896, called "a drastic assertion of na-

Robert W. Cherny is professor of history at San Francisco State University and the author of *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (1985, rpt. 1994).



William Jennings Bryan. NSHS-B915-47

tional government."⁷ Turner seems eventually to have resolved such misgivings; in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1910, he

described Bryan's Democratic Party and the Roosevelt wing of the Republican Party as constituting a western-based "progressive assertion of old democratic

ideals with new weapons."⁸

The third figure in the triptych of Progressive historians was Charles A. Beard. Unlike Parrington and Turner, Beard left no reliable record of his preference in the 1896, 1900, and 1908 presidential elections, although in 1908 he was involved in Morris Hillquit's socialist campaign for Congress in New York City.⁹ In 1914 Beard described the election of 1896 as "a conflict between great wealth and the lower, middle, and working classes" but concluded that the Republicans had won because "the silver issue could not stand the test of logic and understanding."¹⁰ Later, he echoed Parrington in linking Bryan to a "left-wing agrarian movement" that was part of a "century-old conflict between agriculture and capitalism" and the direct descendent of agrarian efforts stretching back to Jefferson.¹¹

If Parrington, Turner, and Beard provided generally positive treatments of Bryan's causes, and some even voted for him, some of his contemporary intellectuals not only took an antagonistic view of Bryan's platforms but also delighted in portraying Bryan as provincial and ignorant. The classic example is from the lethal pen of H. L. Mencken, who dismissed Bryan as "a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without sense or dignity" who had "descended too deeply into the mud, to be taken seriously hereafter by fully literate men, even of the kind who write school-books."¹²

Despite Mencken's admonition, eleven major studies of Bryan were produced before 1945, and nearly all delivered a positive assessment. Eight were written for a popular audience.¹³ A few were pure hero-worship. For example, Wayne C. Williams, a devoted Democrat and committed prohibitionist, passionately endorsed Bryan's views and subtitled his first book *A Study in Political Vindication*.¹⁴ Three popular biographies appeared in 1928 and 1929. Those by M. R. Werner and John C. Long were well-researched and well-balanced, and both gained some acceptance among historians.¹⁵



President William McKinley. NSHS-PC1168-P853

Both saw Bryan in largely positive terms, acknowledging his integrity, courage, and commitment to democratic values. Long, though, also described Bryan as "a cross between St. George and Don Quixote."¹⁶ The third of these popular biographies of Bryan, by Paxton Hibben, will be considered shortly. Works by

leading professors of history or political science before 1945 also presented a generally favorable treatment.

The first, chronologically, was by a leading political scientist, Charles Edward Merriam—a Ph.D. from Columbia, professor at the University of Chicago, unsuccessful Republican candidate for

mayor of Chicago in 1911, president of the American Political Science Association in 1924-25, and president of the Social Science Research Council in 1923-27.¹⁷ In 1924 Merriam evaluated four party leaders, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Bryan. He gave Bryan especially high marks for his commitment to democratic values and for his courage, oratory, persistence, wit, and intuitive sensitivity to what Merriam called "great currents of community feeling." Merriam faulted Bryan primarily for a reluctance to compromise and for an inability to forge an "all-class" political coalition. He suggested too, that Bryan might have been more successful politically had he based his campaigns more on his personal popularity and less on issues.¹⁸

The next scholarly treatment, chronologically, was Joseph V. Fuller's essay on Bryan as secretary of state.¹⁹ Fuller was also a prominent scholar—his Ph.D. was from Harvard, with advanced study at the Universities of Paris and Berlin; he taught history at Harvard, Berkeley, and Wisconsin, and later served as historian and chief of the research section for the State Department.²⁰ Fuller presented a generally positive evaluation of Bryan's tenure as secretary of state, including his "cooling-off" treaties and his role in relations with Latin America, but he focused especially on Bryan's role in maintaining American neutrality after 1914. Writing amidst growing criticism of American participation in World War I, Fuller identified Bryan as "the only member of the Administration who possessed and consistently urged a constructive policy" for maintaining American neutrality, and he implied that Wilson's failure to pursue that policy inevitably led to American entry into the war.

In 1931 Merle Curti followed the general path laid out by Fuller when he produced his book-length study, *Bryan and World Peace*, the result of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1929-30. Curti was another Harvard Ph.D., teaching at Smith College in 1931; he later

served as president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (predecessor of the Organization of American Historians) in 1952-53, and of the American Historical Association in 1953-54.²¹ Curti's subject was the development of Bryan's attitude toward war, and he acknowledged in his first sentence that "the story of William Jennings Bryan's fight against war is a pathetic one," pathetic in part because of the contradictions in Bryan's own position over time toward issues of war and peace and in part because of "the essential futility of the struggle" for peace itself. Acknowledging Bryan's tendency to oversimplify complex issues, Curti nonetheless praised Bryan for his long fight for Philippine independence and suggested that "Bryan's ideal . . . was the basis of Wilson's inspiring program of self-determination for all peoples." At the time Curti was writing, not only were many American intellectuals critical of American participation in World War I, but increasing numbers of them were also critical of war more generally, and some extended their critique to the faltering capitalist economic system. In his study of Bryan, Curti was critical of "imperialism and navalism" and depicted Bryan's growing opposition to those forces as central to an emerging pacifism that led him to advocate arbitration of international disputes, a principle that Curti noted was written into the League of Nations covenant in language taken directly from Bryan's conciliation treaties. Curti acknowledged the contradictions between Bryan's ideals and some of his actions as secretary of state, but he questioned whether "economic imperialism, which was so deeply rooted in our system of industrial and financial capitalism, could be at all effectively checked as long as the system itself was maintained." Curti's final analysis, thus, revealed much of the temper of the times among American intellectuals as he suggested that the failure of Bryan's pacifism stemmed, on the one hand, from an individual inconsistency that placed a higher value on nationalism

than on peace, and, on the other hand, from an intellectual failure to recognize "the connections between capitalism and war."²²

The final example from this period is Henry Steele Commager's 1942 essay on Bryan, which he expanded later in *The American Mind*. Writing for a general audience, Commager depicted Bryan as an intuitive champion of democracy who by persistence and commitment secured important social and economic reforms. "Few statesmen," Commager claimed, "have ever been more fully vindicated by history." Bryan's successes came through his "extraordinary astuteness" and "consummate ability." Commager argued, but he echoed Curti when he noted that Bryan had "an oversimple view of the world" and that "his standards of right and wrong were emotional and personal rather than intellectual."²³ Writing about Bryan for a scholarly audience eight years later, Commager presented much the same view.²⁴ Bryan was "the most representative American of his time," representing what was the "soundest and most wholesome in the American character." Thus, for Commager, Bryan "was neither the simpleton nor the demagogue that his critics pictured and that a later generation . . . imagined"; he was, instead, "the most astute politician of his day the first to understand that the problems of politics were primarily economic."²⁵

Thus, most studies of Bryan's career that appeared between the early 1920s and the end of World War II tended to be drawn from within the Progressive paradigm of American history. Most of them analyzed Bryan's politics in the terms of that paradigm, especially its focus on economic conflict as the center of politics, and most of them presented positive evaluations of Bryan's contributions to American politics.

Before 1948 only one major study had followed Mencken's admonition that Bryan was not to be taken seriously by fully literate men: Paxton Hibben's *The Peerless Leader*. Much of Hibben's work is judicious, but at other times his

approach paralleled, if not reflected, Mencken's argument that Bryan was an ignorant fraud. Charles Beard described Hibben as one who "loved to thwack magnificent hypocrites over their moral knuckles," and Hibben seems to have enjoyed such knuckle-thwacking whether or not he found actual evidence of hypocrisy.²⁶ In presenting Bryan's first election to Congress, for example, Hibben described Bryan's opposition to alcohol, pointed to extensive election fraud by liquor interests, and implied they were responsible for Bryan's narrow victory (they may have been, but only incidentally). He concluded, dramatically but without evidence, that Bryan "had bowed the knee to Baal." Similarly, again without evidence, Hibben accepted Bryan's opponents' claims that Bryan took up the silver issue from opportunism, in response to the largesse of those Hibben labeled the "silver barons."²⁷ Despite the absence of evidence for Hibben's claims of hypocrisy and opportunism, Richard Hofstadter, in 1948, called Hibben's book "by far the best of the Bryan biographies."²⁸

Hofstadter's praise for Hibben's work appeared in his *The American Political Tradition*. In that book, he implicitly criticized the Progressive paradigm when he specified that his purpose was to emphasize "the common climate of American opinion" rather than to contribute to "the tendency to place political conflict in the foreground of history." Hofstadter's work marked the debut of a new paradigm for American political history, one developed by Hofstadter and, among others, David Potter and Louis Hartz.²⁹ Instead of focusing on political conflict and connecting it to underlying economic conflict, as the progressive historians had often done, this new paradigm emphasized pragmatism and consensus, and it sometimes utilized concepts from social psychology to explain those who did not accept the prevailing consensus. This new paradigm, unlike its progressive predecessor, found few heroes in

the American past. In *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter argued that it is better for a democratic society to be "overcritical" than to be "overindulgent," and he disclaimed any intent "to add to a literature of hero-worship and national self-congratulation which is already large."³⁰

There was no hero-worship in Hofstadter's portrait of Bryan. He presented Bryan as conventional, provincial, impractical, and expedient, and he drummed repeatedly on Bryan's lack of intelligence. Hofstadter endorsed Hibben's claim that expediency had dictated at least part of Bryan's commitment to silver, and, in fact, Hofstadter went far beyond Hibben in his explanation for Bryan's long-term role in the passage of such reforms as the income tax, popular election of U.S. senators, woman suffrage, regulation of corporations, and more. Bryan had, Hofstadter suggested, "in the course of a sixteen-year quest for issues, effectively turned public attention upon one reform after another," many of which "had a core of value." Thus, Bryan emerged as a not-very-bright opportunist who almost incidentally hit upon some good ideas as he tried to find some issue with sufficient appeal to get himself elected to office.³¹

Hofstadter's assessment of Bryan was substantially extended by Ray Ginger in *Six Days or Forever?*, his history of the Scopes trial, and especially in his anthology of Bryan's writings. Ginger faulted Werner and Hibben for having presented "nothing sinister" about Bryan; for Ginger, Bryan was "not only a demagogue" but also "a dangerous one." After combing Bryan's extensive writings, Ginger concluded that the many platitudes he found there indicated that "the contents of [Bryan's] mind resembled cooked oatmeal." In all, Ginger presented Bryan as "woefully unqualified to handle the great problems of the nation," but as "superbly equipped to win public office." Ginger even implied that Bryan's career demonstrated the danger that, in a democracy, the voters might elect to the presi-



In addition to hundreds of books and articles, Bryan's career stimulated production of an amazing variety of campaign-related items. One example is this lapel pin, portraying Bryan in a tiny coffin with the slogan, "Free Silver Knocked Him Out." NSHS Museum Collections-11185-1

dency someone who precisely reflected their own ignorance and passions.³²

An almost equally harsh appraisal of Bryan's service as secretary of state was also emerging in the late 1940s and 1950s. The "realist" school of diplomatic historians found virtually nothing of merit in Bryan's record. Richard Challener in 1961 summarized such views: "With his rejection of power politics, his penchant for moralizing, his addiction to platitudinous speeches, and his reliance upon the tenets of Christian pacifism, Bryan seems to be the symbol of virtually every error that is condemned by contemporary critics of the American diplomatic tradition." Challener fully endorsed the realist cri-

tique of Bryan, and added that he had two even greater faults: first, Bryan's "lack of analysis" meant that he approached all issues in terms of right and wrong and that he usually failed to understand the full complexities of situations; and, second, Bryan's "desire for peace" during World War I led him to insist on strict American neutrality rather than permitting him to consider a wider range of options.³³

J. Rogers Hollingsworth, in *The Whirligig of Politics*, an examination of the Democrats during the leadership of Cleveland and Bryan (1963), was also critical of Bryan. Hollingsworth approached the Democratic Party of the 1890s as a case study in the failure of

party leadership to maintain a viable political coalition. He emphasized that a successful party leader was skilled in creating consensus, in bringing conflicting factions together, and in harmonizing diverse interests. By this measure, he judged both Grover Cleveland and Bryan as failures, describing Bryan as "the man who more than anyone else prevented a restoration of party unity."³⁴

Textbooks followed suit. One widely used text on the twentieth-century United States in the early 1960s, for example, said of Bryan little more than that he "had not lent the [Democratic] party much in intellectual distinction."³⁵

By the time Hollingsworth's and Ginger's works appeared, however, a more balanced and less critical view of Bryan had already begun to emerge. The first such statement came from Paul Glad in 1960, entitled *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and His Democracy, 1896-1912*. Glad's purpose was to place Bryan into the context of the years 1896-1912, when his political influence was greatest, and he based his treatment of Bryan on extensive work in the primary sources. He found the key to Bryan's character in his religious faith, his sympathy for the underprivileged, his commitment to service to others, and his devotion to majority rule. These traditional values, according to Glad, gave Bryan the basis for his commitment to his many causes, for throughout his career he suggested that "adjustments to profound social and economic change could be made without sacrificing values of the past."³⁶

Where Glad had studied the first part of Bryan's career, Lawrence Levine analyzed its conclusion in *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan, the Last Decade, 1915-1925* (1965). In his introduction, he noted that some of his friends who had read the manuscript had been disappointed that he had not injected a greater "sense of moral outrage" into it, but Levine had refused, explaining that Bryan "has been too often judged and too little understood." Bryan's career, according to Levine, was

based on a "Christian morality" that provided him with a guide to daily life and on an understanding of majority rule that proved to be "the source of both the most noble and least worthy aspects." Like the consensus historians under whom he had studied at Columbia, Levine found both irony and paradox in Bryan's career: irony in that he fought not only for the economic and political rights of Americans, but also to free Americans from temptation by placing limits on them; paradox in that his "faith in the inevitability of progress" was coupled to "a desire to see America remain unchanged."³⁷

Of the new studies of Bryan to appear in the 1960s, the work of Paolo Coletta was the most extensive.³⁸ Beginning with an article in 1949, his work on Bryan eventually included more than a dozen articles along with a three-volume biography of some 1200 pages. Coletta's exhaustive research spiked several Bryan myths. For example, he effectively denied the claims of Bryan's political opponents, endorsed by Hibben, Hofstadter, and others, that Bryan's support for silver was merely an exercise in expediency, motivated by financial support from silver mining interests or by a desire to gain votes.³⁹ Arguing that Bryan was consistent and principled, Coletta echoed Merriam's earlier suggestion that Bryan's commitment to principle had cost him political support in his campaigns for the presidency, but Coletta also pointed to the many reforms Bryan had helped to bring to fruition.⁴⁰ Coletta noted that Bryan's vision of diplomacy was one based on morality and Christian pacifism, not Realpolitik, and was, therefore, "a great failure" if, as some realist historians had claimed, "the ultimate test of statesmanship lies in the use . . . of . . . coercion in international relations."⁴¹ Like most who have treated Bryan, Coletta specified that Bryan did not have "a highly trained mind" and that he was not well-read, though he did have "an exceptionally retentive memory."⁴² Describing Bryan as a "political evangelist" and a

"moral statesman," Coletta suggested that his major contribution to American politics had been his ability to "read the public mind, sense injustice intuitively, specify what reforms are needed, defy unpopularity with interests that do not want to see tidy and profitable arrangements disturbed, and enunciate demands for improvement so powerfully that the people take up the cry, vote their protests, and force statesmen to deal with them."⁴³

Shortly after the publication of the final volume of Coletta's study, there appeared another massive scholarly biography of Bryan. The author, Louis W. Koenig, was a professor of government at New York University, a former official with the State Department and the Bureau of the Budget, and the author of acclaimed studies of the presidency. Writing during Richard Nixon's presidency, Koenig described Bryan as unlike most prominent American politicians, who, he claimed, had succeeded in politics through their "manipulative skills" and their ability at compromising and at "displacing conflict with consensus." Koenig emphasized that Bryan was, instead, an "ideologist devoted to a body of serious political beliefs that were germane to society's central problems, and [that] he was willing to place them above victory." Where Hollingsworth had scored Bryan's failure to achieve consensus, Koenig now praised Bryan's commitment to principle. And, Koenig argued, this made Bryan still relevant for the 1970s as "an articulate champion who viewed public problems through humane and moral lenses" and who sought "to eradicate the scourge of war." In fact, Koenig claimed, "Bryan had no counterpart on the American scene until Robert F. Kennedy's quest for the presidential nomination in 1968."⁴⁴

The late 1970s and 1980s also produced a significant number of new works on Bryan, some focusing on specific aspects of The Great Commoner's career—his religious thought or his oratory—and others offering syntheses based both on the many new works and

on a reconsideration of the primary sources.⁴⁵

In 1982 Kendrick Clements, for example, produced a perceptive analysis of Bryan's attitudes toward and influence on foreign policy. Clements's study began as his dissertation at Berkeley, from which he received his Ph.D. in 1970. He labeled Bryan a "missionary isolationist" for his belief that "the United States had a special duty to improve and serve the world while at the same time remaining free of most entanglements." He argued that Bryan's attitude toward foreign affairs was formed not from careful analysis of the national interest or of events overseas but instead from his Christian principles and his intuitive feel for the "fears and desires" of his followers. Clements denied that Bryan had ever been a pacifist because he never completely ruled out the use of force, and he argued that, in fact, Bryan's belief in the superiority of American institutions and values "made it easy for him to rationalize imposing those values on others." Bryan was, therefore, a "militant missionary." Thus, Clements argued that Bryan's belief in democracy made it easier for him to "rationalize the use of force," as in 1898 and 1917, when he was convinced that force was being used in furtherance of the will of the majority. Clements was also careful to specify that Bryan opposed any use of force to protect American business interests.⁴⁶

In 1981 David D. Anderson, a professor of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University, produced a study of Bryan as "writer and thinker." Like Commager, Koenig, and others, Anderson portrayed Bryan as neither demagogue nor simpleton but as, instead, "largely responsible for laying the foundation of American liberalism for our time."⁴⁷ My own biography of Bryan was published in 1985, and was followed soon after by LeRoy Ashby's *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy*. Though not accepting the claim of Koenig and Anderson that Bryan was the fount of modern liberal-

ism, Ashby specified that Bryan "helped to sketch out the protective and welfare responsibilities of the modern state."⁴⁸ John Milton Cooper, in a recent essay on the Democratic Party, described Bryan as "one of the country's three most significant leaders during the first third of the twentieth century, ranking with Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson."



Mary Baird Bryan. NSHS-8915-118

Noting that "in important respects [Bryan] was the one who made [the Democratic Party] what it remains to this day," he described Bryan as the Democrats' Moses, "the prophet who led them through the wilderness," and he continued the metaphor by presenting Woodrow Wilson as the Democrats' Joshua, who "went on to conquer" but who "owed much to his predecessor."⁴⁹

In all these analyses, there still remain a few topics that have not yet been covered. No one has centrally treated Mary Baird Bryan. While some Bryan biographers have credited her as

unacknowledged coeditor of Bryan's newspaper, *The Commoner*, and some have noted her role as coauthor for some of Bryan's speeches or writings, no one has made an effort to examine her life at any depth or length, to study Bryan's career from her perspective, and to present her own quite impressive career in its own right. Another unexplored dimension is Bryan's medical history. Some historians have argued that Bryan's behavior and politics changed around the time he served as secretary of state; others have denied any such shift. No one, however, has considered the possibility that a change in his personality may have had a connection to his diabetes, which was first diagnosed in 1914 and was controlled thereafter by diet.

However, there seem few such unexplored corners in the Bryan mansion, and, at the same time, there has emerged a considerable consensus regarding Bryan's place in the history of American politics. Since the 1920s most historians and political scientists who have studied Bryan at length have presented him as guided by a principled commitment to popular democracy and to a positive use of government to foster the well-being of ordinary people in general and specifically to counteract the great concentrations of economic power engendered by a sometimes voracious industrial market economy. Many Bryan scholars have agreed that his personal popularity was greater than the support for his issues, and that his principled insistence on the primacy of issues in his presidential campaigns may actually have limited his political appeal. Many have stressed his commitment to Christian service as a guiding principle in his life. Most, too, have agreed that his thinking was largely intuitive rather than based on careful and detailed intellectual analyses, although, to be certain, intuitive thinking rather than intellectual analysis has rarely proven an insurmountable barrier to the White House. Most recent scholars have also agreed that Bryan's views on race were only



BOUND TO STICK.

Bryan provided fodder for the illustrated weeklies long after McKinley was in his grave. *Judge*, June 6, 1908. NSHS Museum Collections-11055-2066

slightly enlightened for his time.

Perhaps most importantly, most historians have agreed that, as a political leader, Bryan had a sincere and unshakable confidence in the ability of the people to govern themselves, and that his confidence in the people was recip-

rocated in the form of a popular following with few parallels in American politics. Many have agreed, too, that this large following gave Bryan a significant role—sometimes, perhaps, the most significant role—in the passage of such reforms as the income tax, direct election

of senators, prohibition, and woman suffrage. Many recent scholars have agreed, too, that, under Bryan's leadership, the Democratic Party jettisoned most of the commitment to minimal government that had been the party's most prominent characteristic from Andrew Jackson to Grover Cleveland. Instead, Bryan and his allies fused the antimonopolism of Jackson to a commitment to governmental intervention on behalf of "the people" and against powerful economic interests. Thus, many Bryan scholars have presented him as a central figure—sometimes even *the* central figure—in the birth of the twentieth-century Democratic Party.

It is important not to claim too much in this regard. After all, Bryan left the Democratic Party a minority, and it was Al Smith and especially Franklin D. Roosevelt who transformed it into the majority. Though Bryan argued forcefully for a stronger governmental role in the economy in order to constrain great concentrations of economic power, it was the New Deal that grafted the notion of economic redistribution onto the regulatory state that had been created during the Progressive era. Bryan's role nonetheless emerges as pivotal, for it was under his leadership that the Democratic Party separated the two central elements in its Jacksonian legacy, kept its commitment to working people and farmers, but discarded its belief in minimal government. Bryan instead argued passionately for the use of an activist state to defend ordinary citizens from great concentrations of economic power. In doing so, he laid the basis for the party of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson.

Notes

An earlier draft of this essay was presented as the author's presidential address to the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, during the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, on March 29, 1996.

¹ In the 1950s, D. C. Heath published, in its Problems in American Civilization series, a title on *William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896*, but it was actually mistitled because it focused on

Bryan's entire career and scarcely even mentioned poor McKinley. The title, however, suggests a number of other unwritten anthologies: *Alfred Landon and the Campaign of 1936*, *Michael Dukakis and the Campaign of 1988*.

¹ Richard Lee Metcalfe, *Life and Patriotic Services of Hon. William J. Bryan, the Fearless and Brilliant Leader of the People and Candidate for President of the United States* (Omaha: Edgewood Publishing Company, 1896); Metcalfe, comp., *The Real Bryan Being Extracts from the Speeches and Writings of "A Well-Rounded Man"* (Des Moines: Personal Help Publishing Company, 1903); Mary Baird Bryan, biographical sketch, in *Life and Speeches of Hon. Wm. Jennings Bryan* (Baltimore: R. H. Woodward, 1900), 19-55, and biographical introduction, *Speeches of William Jennings Bryan*, 2 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909, 1911), see also *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan, by Himself and his Wife, Mary Baird Bryan* (Philadelphia/Chicago: John C. Winston, 1925).

² For the Progressive paradigm, see Henry Steele Commager, "Innovators in Historical Interpretation: Turner, Parrington, Beard," ch. 14 of *The American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950); Richard Holstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968); Gene Wise, ch. 7, *American Historical Explanations*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Peter Novick, ch. 4 of *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ernst A. Breisach, *American Progressive History: An Experiment in Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³ Holstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 369-70.

⁴ Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927-30), 3:xxxiv.

⁵ Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner, Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 438-39.

⁶ Turner, "The Problem of the West," originally published September 1896, in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 75.

⁷ Turner, "Social Forces in American History," originally published in 1911, *Frontier and Section*, 166.

⁸ Ellen Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 12, 23, 45-46, 52. Nore never mentions Bryan specifically, but notes that Beard disliked the antimonopolism of La Follette and Wilson, whose views on monopoly were similar to Bryan's. She does puncture the myth that Beard spent considerable time during college in Chicago and had been converted to populism and socialist

ideas then. There is no indication of his preference for president in 1896 (although Nore does find some suggestion that he may have followed his family's Republican proclivities), and in 1900 he was in England.

⁹ Charles A. Beard, *Contemporary American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 164, 194-96, as quoted in Nore, *Beard*, 67.

¹⁰ Charles A. Beard, *The American Party Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), chs. 6-8, esp. 108, 111, 118; see also Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *A Basic History of the United States* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1944), 334-35, where the Beards describe Bryan's 1896 campaign as having "vibrated with revolutionary fervor" and as attracting "nearly all the discontent with the course of national affairs that had been made manifest by Labor Reformers, Greenbackers, Single Taxers, and Socialists in recent years—all the inveterate hostility to concentrated wealth."

¹¹ "In Memoriam: W. J. B.," in *The Vintage Mencken*, Alistair Cooke, comp. (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1955), 163-64.

¹² They were, in chronological sequence: Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan: A Study in Political Vindication* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1923); Genevieve Forbes Herrick and John Ongen Herrick, *The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Chicago: Grover C. Buxton, 1925); Charles Edward Merriam, *Four American Party Leaders*, Henry Ward Beecher Foundation lectures, Amherst College (New York: Macmillan, 1926); Joseph Vincent Fuller, "William Jennings Bryan," in v. 10 of *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy*, ed. Samuel Flagg Bemis (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1928); J. C. Long, *Bryan, the Great Commoner* (New York: D. Appleton, 1928); Paxton Hibben, completed by C. Hartley Grafton, *The Peerless Leader, William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1929); Morris Robert Werner, *Bryan* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929); Merle Eugene Curti, "Bryan and World Peace," *Smith College Studies in History* 16 (1931): 111-262; Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936); Charles McDaniel Rosser, *The Crusading Commoner: A Close-Up of William Jennings Bryan and His Times* (Dallas: Mathis, Van Nort, 1937); and Henry Steele Commager, "William Jennings Bryan," in *There Were Giants in the Land* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942), 96-103.

¹³ Williams, *Bryan: Study in Political Vindication*, and *Bryan*. For Williams, see *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White, 1962), 44:319. Fleming H. Revell, publisher of Williams's earlier book, was also Bryan's publisher at about the same time.

¹⁴ For citations to Hibben and Werner as, presumably, the standard treatments, see, e.g., Harold U. Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice, 1898-1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 342, and Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865-1896* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 714, 719. For a cita-

tion to Long and Hibben as the standards, see George F. Whicher, ed., *William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1953), 108. Horace Samuel Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West, 1865-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), 282, cited only Hibben. Oscar Handlin et al., *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 191, listed only Werner. Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 294, listed Hibben, Werner, Williams, and Long, but dismissed them all as "either overly critical or else worshipful." Faulkner, in *Politics, Reform and Expansion, 1890-1900* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 285-86, cited Hibben and Werner as "popular and mildly satirical" and Long and Williams as "more appreciative," but also noted that a "full-length or competent biography" had yet to be done.

¹⁵ Long, *Bryan*, 19.

¹⁶ *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, D: 435.

¹⁷ Merriam, *Four American Party Leaders*, esp. 63-101.

¹⁸ [Fuller,] "William Jennings Bryan," *American Secretaries of State*, 10: 3-46.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 1932, 32.

²⁰ *Directory of American Scholars*, 8th ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1982), 1:164.

²¹ Curti, *Bryan and World Peace*, esp. 113, 134, 163, 177, 253.

²² Commager, "William Jennings Bryan," *Giants in the Land*, 96-103, esp. 99-101. Commager presented a similar view in one of the most popular history texts of the 1930s, where he described Bryan's career as characterized by "utter sincerity, passionate conviction, courage, audacity, genuine faith in the wisdom of the plain people and the processes of democracy, religious belief in the identity of morals and politics, and an unalterable assurance that the right must eventually triumph over the wrong"; Samuel Eliot Morison and Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), 2:262, as quoted in Ray Ginger, *William Jennings Bryan: Selections*, American Heritage Series (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xii.

²³ In his preface, Commager acknowledged that his "deepest intellectual debt" was to Parrington: Commager, "Innovators," *The American Mind*, ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 346-47.

²⁵ Introduction to Hibben, *Peerless Leader*, xiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 124, 164-65.

²⁷ Richard Holstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948), 370.

²⁸ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic*

Abundance and the American Character (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

³⁰ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, vii, xi. For the transition from the Progressive paradigm to the consensus paradigm, see the sources already noted in note 3, especially Wise.

³¹ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 186-205, esp. 190, 193-94, 196, 198, 202.

³² Ginger, *Bryan: Selections*, xiii-xlv, esp. xlii, xxxii, xxxv, xxxvi, xl, xliii.

³³ Richard Challener, "William Jennings Bryan," in *An Uncertain Tradition: American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman A. Graebner (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 80, 99.

³⁴ J. Rogers Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics: The Democracy of Cleveland and Bryan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), ix, 236-41.

³⁵ David A. Shannon, *Twentieth Century America: The United States since the 1890's* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), 49.

³⁶ Paul W. Glad, *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and His Democracy* (Lincoln: Uni-

versity of Nebraska Press, 1960), esp. 176.

³⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Defender of the Faith, William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), viii, 54, 66, 128, 181, 224-25, 257, 358, 361-64. While generally judicious and balanced in his judgments on Bryan, Levine was much too harsh in his conclusion that Bryan's attitude toward southern African Americans was "worthy of any Klan member" (257), a claim that even Ginger disputed.

³⁸ Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964, 1969).

³⁹ Coletta, *Bryan*, I: vii, 66-68, 74-75, 100-01, 198 n148. Coletta also demonstrated convincingly that Bryan's oft-cited comment that "I don't know anything about free silver. The people of Nebraska are for free silver and I am from free silver. I will look up the arguments later," was made well after he had spent a great deal of time studying the arguments.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I:438-45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:361.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3:285.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3:294.

⁴⁴ Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography*

of William Jennings Bryan (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 10-12.

⁴⁵ Willard H. Smith, *The Social and Religious Thought of William Jennings Bryan* (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1975); Donald K. Springen, *William Jennings Bryan: Orator of Small-Town America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

⁴⁶ Kendrick A. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan: Missionary Isolationist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), xii, 153-55.

⁴⁷ *William Jennings Bryan*, Twayne's United States authors series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981).

⁴⁸ Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, Little Brown's Library of American Biography, edited by Oscar Handlin (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994). LeRoy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy*, Twayne's Twentieth-century American Biography Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), esp. xvi.

⁴⁹ John Milton Cooper, "Wilsonian Democracy," in *Democrats and the American Idea: A Bicentennial Appraisal*, ed. Peter B. Kovler (Washington, D.C.: Center for National Policy Press, 1992), 213-14.



A "transparency" from the 1896 campaign. A cloth cover with a political slogan or portrait was stretched over a light wooden frame and illuminated from within by a torchlight. Courtesy of Osceola Masonic Lodge No. 65, Osceola, Nebraska