



The Youth of William Jennings Bryan—Beginnings of a Christian Statesman

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WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN



MARY BAIRD BRYAN

Two Illinois young people destined to play an important role in the history of Nebraska. (Photographs, Courtesy The Illinois State Historical Society.)

THE YOUTH OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN—BEGINNINGS OF A CHRISTIAN STATESMAN

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

THE youth of William Jennings Bryan is an excellent example of the adage that the man is the father of the boy and the boy is the father of the man. Silas Lillard Bryan, the father, died when William Jennings was twenty years old, but by that time the characteristic traits which marked the life and career of his famous son had already been formed. To a large extent William's physical powers, capacity for speaking, sense of humor, personal habits, choice of vocation, political beliefs and religious philosophy are attributable to his parents. The determination with which William performed what he considered to be his duty, the devotion with which he sought to implement his purposes, and the self-righteousness which he exhibited on occasion also came to him by inheritance. Moreover, the philosophy of life held by William Jennings when he attained his majority remained remarkably unchanged for the rest of his life.

Silas Bryan, tall, gaunt, with an aquiline nose and thin lips, had been orphaned at the age of fourteen. By working as a farm hand, woodchopper and country school teacher he had succeeded in graduating and getting an M. A. from McKendree College, a Baptist institution at Lebanon, Missouri. Law and a public career, however, appealed to him more than pedagogy, and he was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1851. On November 4, 1852, his thirtieth birthday, he married and settled down in Salem, Illinois. For eight years he served in the Illinois state senate, where he saw the crystallization of the issues which provoked the "irrepressible" conflict, the splitting of the Democracy, the death of the Whig and the birth of the Republican party. In 1860

he failed of re-election, but the end of his legislative experience marked the beginning of a judicial career which lasted for twelve years. From the bench he could have avoided the troubled political waters of the war and reconstruction periods, but he continued to participate in politics and to make speeches advocating the application of Christian morality to the solution of current issues. He also was a member of the constitutional convention of 1870, in which he played a creditable part. He uttered a "ringing protest" against a proposal to omit the printing of the daily prayer in the convention Journal, suggested ways of economizing in the conduct of the state's administration, and opposed state subsidies to public improvements. He demanded that the compensation of public officers be regulated by constitutional provision rather than by legislation, presented communications favoring the establishment of public libraries, and resolved that legislative, executive and judicial offices should be filled by popular election.¹ Thus he proved himself a democrat in the literal sense, espousing a philosophy which, stemming from Jeffersonian days, had surrounded him in the Jacksonian period of his youth and which he had carried from the mountains of his native Virginia to the prairies of Illinois.

Silas Bryan was a man of strong character and integrity, a graceful and forceful speaker, a capable legislator and a venerated judge. He led his household in its spiritual as well as its temporal affairs. He was a deacon of the Baptist church, followed the dictates of the Bible in his personal affairs and allowed them to temper the severity of the worldly justice he dispensed as a judge. In later life his devoutness extended to the bench, where he would stop the proceedings at noon in order, very unostentatiously, to pray; and he would seek heavenly guidance prior to rendering an important decision. He had a philosophical and somewhat argumentative mind. His decisions reached and

¹ *Proceedings of the Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1870*, p. 139; *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of 1870*, I, 75, 83, 139, 310-12.

blessed by prayer, he could not believe them wrong. When told one day that the Supreme Court of the State had reversed six of his decisions, he retorted: "The Supreme Court is wrong." When he left the bench after twelve years of service he delivered a farewell address to a grand jury which sums up his philosophy of life:

I have not grown rich from the spoils of office. During the whole term of twelve years I have received not more than a living. I have nevertheless succeeded reasonably well in the affairs of life and have of the world's goods a reasonable competency, but it has not come to me from office. It has been the result of rigid economy, long and patient professional labor, and the sweat of the face in agricultural pursuits, aided and supported by Heaven's greatest endowment—an affectionate, confiding and prudential companion—and finally, gentlemen of the jury, I add that the experience of public life has tended to confirm in me the convictions of my early education—that the more we conform our lives and actions, both in private and public relations, to the demands of honor, truth, sincerity, justice, and Christianity, the greater will be our happiness and prosperity, and the better we shall enjoy this present world, and the broader will be the foundation for the enjoyment of the world to come.²

After his retirement from the bench the Judge returned to the practice of law. He became known as a trial lawyer of recognized ability and as an advocate who frequently quoted Scripture to juries and who was zealously loyal to his clients. He continued to contribute in various ways to the advancement of his community. He reserved a bedroom in his home for the politicians and divines who came to visit him. The bringing together of these two types of community leaders illustrated for his children his contention that service in either field, religion or government, was entirely honorable. William Jennings saw this clearly. His father, he said, "shared Jefferson's confidence in the capacity of the people for self-government as well as in their right to self-government I have credited him with a definite influence in the shaping of my religious views; I am also indebted to him for the trend of my views

² William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia, 1925), p. 242.

on some fundamental questions of government, and have seen no reason to depart from the line he marked out."³

To the father may also be traced some of the personal habits inherited by William and the formation in him of a nascent morality that hardened as the years went by. Silas had used tobacco in college but had given it up before William was born. He never used liquor. He hated games of chance and taught his children to hate gambling. He led an exemplary family life and remained eminently domestic despite his large part in public affairs. His interest in education was inveterate: he gave financial as well as moral support to various institutions of learning; his will provided that all of his children should be encouraged to secure the "highest education" that the generation afforded; he made many speeches on educational topics. And to a character of sterling worth he added the ability to get along with people and to take the butt end of jokes with a saving sense of humor. William Jennings never smoked, drank, cursed, or gambled. Like his father he was faithful in all domestic matters, fought for what he considered right in the field of education, and possessed an even greater ability to tell jokes in which he himself provided the laughing stock.

Silas' mate, Mariah Elizabeth Jennings, was a tall, straight, upstanding woman. She had brown hair, gray eyes, a long nose and high cheek bones. She married Silas when she was eighteen and discharged her maternal duties in such fashion that, according to William Jennings, "she was as nearly a perfect wife and mother as one could be."⁴ With the Judge away so much on circuit she was left to direct the homestead and to exercise full control over the children. In addition to fulfilling these duties she somehow found time and energy to give her children the fundamentals of an education and to devote herself both to church work and to various local societies for social improvement. She accompanied herself on the piano as she sang to the children the songs of the day, and participated as a member

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

of the household choir which the Judge led in a capable and vigorous tenor. The Judge checked his sons' musical ambitions by saying that music was all right for his daughters, but his sons would learn how to make music on the handsaw.

Although Silas and Mariah maintained memberships in different churches (she was a Methodist) for the first twenty years of their married life, until she became a Baptist, religious harmony prevailed in the home. Each year they invited to dinner all the ministers of Salem, regardless of denomination, and sent to each a load of hay. Mariah's abhorrence of swearing made as deep an impression upon the children as the Judge's admonition against gambling. William Jennings Bryan confessed his indebtedness equally to his mother and father for good counsel and instruction: "I do not know of a virtue that came into my life as a result of my joining the church, because all the virtues had been taught me by my parents."⁵

As additional children were born to the Bryans (three of nine children died in infancy) and the house in town became overcrowded, Silas moved his family out to a five hundred acre farm about a mile northwest of town. He satisfied an ambition to be a country gentleman at the age of forty-four by building an estate that was a showplace of Marion county. He erected a ten-room house in the Virginia mansion style, furnished it with walnut furniture and good silver, enclosed fourteen acres for a deer park, and reserved an eighty acre timber tract for hunting.

Because the Bryans thought that the influence of the home was more desirable than that of the public schools, Mariah played schoolmistress to the children. For the first four years on the farm, for example, she directed William's education out of Webster's speller, McGuffey's reader, and a geography. The parents were not averse to chastising an errant child. "My parents," said William, "believed in the old adage, 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' and as they loved me too well to risk my being spoiled, they punished

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

me."⁶ William's friends acknowledged that the Bryans reared their children more strictly than most other parents. The Judge would see to it, personally, on Sundays, that his children had memorized the catechisms he brought them as presents when he returned from holding court in distant districts.

As a child of six William had already supported three ambitions in life—to be a Baptist preacher, to be a farmer and raise pumpkins, and to be a lawyer like his father. When still a barefoot boy he would go to the courthouse, sit upon the steps leading up to the bench, and listen to the trial of cases. He began to look forward to the time when he too would be practicing at the bar. This last purpose remained with him and charted his educational career. Later he farmed as a gentleman farmer and became almost as well known for his pulpit as his political oratory. He learned to make speeches according to his mother's pedagogical method: after memorizing his lessons he would stand upon a little table and recite them to his mother—a receptive, appreciative and enthusiastic audience.

Although Judge Bryan farmed like a country gentleman, cultivating only a few acres and renting out the rest of his land, and although the family lived a suburban rather than a farm life, his sons had to perform the traditional chores allotted to farm boys—feeding the deer and helping to care for the hogs, stock and chickens. Being the eldest son William had to use the "laboring oar." "If I were required to select the days of my boyhood which were the least enjoyed," he said, "the lot would fall on the winter days of this period. My first business was to make the fire in the Franklin stove and then go to the barn and feed the horses, cows and hogs." With his nose running and fingers numb with cold he performed his icy chores, possessing feelings "for which the Sunday-school songs I knew did not furnish fitting expression."⁷ However, he appreciated the benefits which accrued to him from farm work: "I look back to

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

those days as among the most valuable of my life. . . . They taught me industry and obedience and they gave me an exercise which no gymnasium can supply. My physical strength has been an invaluable asset and I feel that I am indebted to work upon the farm that has enabled me to endure fatigue and withstand disease."⁸

Hunting expeditions frequently provided diversion from the work of the farm. The Judge, who liked to hunt, gave his sons guns as soon as they were able to use them, spent many evenings at home with them molding bullets and cleaning guns, and proved to be one of their favorite hunting companions. The usual hunting accidents occurred, but providentially no one was hurt. Other favorite winter sports were skating and bobsledding. Often, too, a group of boys and girls, including the numerous offspring of Russell Bryan, the Judge's brother, would walk out to the farm from town for an evening's entertainment. The Judge was an ideal host: the games were fun, the food plentiful and good.

Precepts taught and examples set in the home appear more responsible than either the school or church for the formation of the characters and attitudes of the Bryan children. Both parents set excellent personal examples, they taught their children obedience, with a tanning when learning proved difficult, and the fear of God. At noon the approach of the Judge under the row of stately trees leading to the house was a signal for William Jennings to come in from the fields for the reading and discussion of a portion of the Bible. The Judge would often read from Proverbs, a book re-read because of its wisdom on moral questions. The family prayers conducted by the Judge became to William "one of the sweetest recollections of my boyhood." Late on Sunday afternoons the family would gather about the piano and sing hymns, usually closing with the Judge's choice, "Kind Words Can Never Die," and the Judge would read poems to the children, most often his favorite, "Ode to a Waterfowl," by Bryant. Later in life William said of the poem: "I know of no more comforting words outside of

⁸ *Ibid.*

Holy Writ than those of the last stanza:

He who from zone to zone
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight;
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

William's parents stimulated his devotion to religion and encouraged his predilection for oratory, the church and its works provided additional formative influences, and the debating clubs in the public schools whetted to a sharper edge an already keen forensic appetite. After the Judge's death William read the entire Book of Proverbs once a month for a year; he amazed his Sunday school teachers by his knowledge, and quoted more from Proverbs than from any other part of the Bible in his political speeches.

Violent religious emotionalism, although becoming rarer than in earlier times, still continued in emasculated form in camp meetings and revivals. William Jennings and his older sister, Fanny, made it a practice to attend these revival meetings and both, while at a Presbyterian church, were converted and decided to become members. They told their father about their decision. He merely said, "You children will have to form opinions of your own. I hope they will be right."⁹ Neither he nor the mother objected to their children's affiliation with a church not their own, and it was not until the Judge died that William learned that he had been disappointed in not seeing him a member of the Baptist church. William's joining the Presbyterian church is in large part explained by his witnessing of an immersion in his father's church. Upon reaching home he asked if it would be necessary to be immersed in order to become a Baptist preacher. The Judge said yes. "Never afterwards," said William, "would I say that I was going to be a Baptist preacher."¹⁰

In the light of later developments it is important to note that fundamentalist leanings formed early in William

⁹ Paxton Hibben, *The Peerless Leader: William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1929), p. 49.

¹⁰ William Jennings Bryan, "The Value of an Ideal," *The Speeches of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1909), II, 238.

Jennings Bryan. His boyhood years were years of bitter war between orthodoxy and latitudinarianism. The crying need of the times, to many, was a faith to bridge the gap between scientific discoveries and old religious traditions. The Bryans, albeit tolerant in the outward shows of religion, possessed deep and permanent convictions on Christian fundamentals, and to them as well as to his teachers William Jennings rendered thanks for his fundamentalism:

The period through which one passes . . . in the journey from youth to maturity is quite likely to be accompanied by some religious uncertainty . . . It is just at this time when the parental authority is weakening that usually the student begins in the study of the physical sciences. If he is fortunate enough to have teachers who are themselves Christians with a spiritual vision of life, the effect is to strengthen his faith and he advances to a normal religious life. If he is unfortunate enough to fall under the influence of mind worshippers, he may be led step by step away from faith into unbelief. It is a matter of profound gratitude to me that during these days I was associated with Christian instructors so that the doubts aroused by my studies were resolved by putting them beside a powerful and loving God.¹¹

Despite his evident devotion to the Word, his great regard for the ministerial calling, and an invitation from the Presbyterian pastor in Salem to prepare for the ministry, William felt that his life work lay in the law rather than in the ministry, but he made friends of every pastor he met, always transferred his letter of church membership whenever he moved, and displayed an unceasing interest in religious matters.

Simultaneously with the revival movement which gathered him into the fold a temperance crusade swept Illinois. Female temperance crusaders descended upon the legislators in session at Springfield and got them all to sign the pledge. Silas Bryan, frequently accompanied by Mariah and their youngest daughter, spoke often at temperance meetings.¹² Both of William's parents impressed upon him the evils of the use of liquor and he began to sign the pledge

¹¹ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 51.

¹² Interview with Mrs. Mary (Elizabeth Bryan) Allen, Lincoln, Nebraska, August 4, 1948.

even before he had a clear understanding of what the temperance question involved. By the time he was twelve signing the pledge had become a habit. A story has it that when he was thirteen he and a friend were hired to carry refreshments to the threshing hands, that he gladly carried water, but that he refused to carry whisky.¹³

When he retired from the bench in 1872 Silas Bryan became a candidate for Congress. It was a stirring campaign. The terms "fusion" and "bolting" filled the air, but Silas, despite both Democratic and Greenback support, lost to a Republican. It has been rumored that he lost because he refused to contribute five hundred dollars to the party chest, a lesson in practical politics not lost upon William Jennings. Silas had written to Lyman Trumbull, with whom he had sat in the state senate, that he considered him the providential man for the presidential candidacy. Nevertheless he supported Greeley as the party's choice. He felt keenly the loss of the presidency to the Democracy. As a memento of the campaign he gave William an inscribed copy of the national Democratic convention's proceedings. This was the Judge's last campaign. "What's the use," he may have asked, as he frequently did when referring to a closed case, "of pounding on the log after the coon's gone?"¹⁴

There is a story, spread by Mark Sullivan and others, that William Jennings delivered a speech in his father's behalf in this campaign, that the Judge himself pushed his son forward, and that the excellence of the speech stilled the laughter aroused by the sight of the youngster. The incident may be dismissed as apocryphal and historically incorrect, but the campaign did provoke in William an enthusiasm unusual in a boy his age; he recalled later in life that it was this campaign which had attracted his attention to public life as a career.¹⁵

¹³ Jesse E. Boell, "William Jennings Bryan Before 1896" (Ms. thesis University of Nebraska, 1929), p. 5.

¹⁴ J. T. Dorris, "Hon. Thomas E. Merritt," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XI, 503.

¹⁵ The story is contained in Mark Sullivan, *Our Times* (New York, 1926), I, 115-16, and is based on a sworn statement by a Dr. William Hall which is condemned as historically incorrect by internal evidence.

Three years later, with his head full of politics, fortified with a protecting insulation of fundamentalism, and armed with a letter of transfer from the Presbyterian church at Salem, William Jennings prepared to meet the "mind worshippers" in the field of higher education. The "highest" course would be taken, and it was planned that a post-graduate year would be spent at Oxford, England. Silas wanted his son to go to William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, but the offer of Dr. H. K. Jones, Silas' cousin, of a home for William during his college years probably accounts for his going instead to Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois. William entered as a "middler," *i. e.*, one who had already completed two years of high school, in Whipple Academy, the preparatory department for the college. He went to Jacksonville a "typical farmer lad with all the crudities that are characteristic of the species;" he became a real asset to the college and graduated as valedictorian and class orator.

When William left home to enter Whipple the Judge gave him a Greek lexicon and a Latin lexicon, two of the largest books in his library, and told him that in college he would use the former for six years and the latter for five. And so it transpired, for the classical curriculum had changed but little since the Judge's days at McKendree, and it was a classical world of learning, permeated by a religious atmosphere, into which William entered when he arrived at Jacksonville. All students were required to attend a church in the city on the Sabbath morning and chapel services held on the campus in the afternoon. Each school day opened with the reading of a portion of the Scriptures and the Lord's Prayer.

Dr. Jones, who taught medicine and philosophy at Illinois College, was a widely known student and teacher of Plato. While Bryan was living in his home he, together with Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William T. Harris, organized and taught at the Concord, Massachusetts, School of Philosophy. He induced his famous friends to address the citizens of Jacksonville. With Bryan perhaps as an auditor, Plato, with some of Hegel, formed

the meat of many philosophical disputations at the Jones home, where the conversation frequently turned to the hotly debated subject of evolution.¹⁶ Whether Bryan heard B. F. Underwood, the "well-known materialist and free-thinker," deliver a series of lectures on free thought, fallacies regarding the Bible, Darwinism and the origin and evolution of religion during commencement week of 1876, is unknown, but there is evidence that he knew something about the evolutionary hypothesis as a sophomore.¹⁷ He mentioned it in the prize essay he wrote that year, and it provided a disquieting influence upon his trend of religious thought. He did not immediately join a church in Jacksonville. He appeared uncertain about joining at all. To ease the ferment which was within him, as he tried to square what his teachers said with what the Bible said, he wrote to the great agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, and asked him for his views on God and Immortality. A secretary sent back a stereotyped reply in which was enclosed a printed copy of one of Ingersoll's addresses. Ingersoll had expressed himself about as follows: "I do not say that there is no God, I simply say I do not know. I do not say there is no life beyond the grave, I simply say I do not know." "From that day to this," said Bryan, "I have asked myself the question and have been unable to answer it to my own satisfaction, how could anyone find pleasure in taking from a human heart a living faith and substituting therefor the cold and cheerless doctrine 'I do not know.'"¹⁸ Bryan took his letter of membership to the Presbyterian church.

Bryan's favorite study was mathematics until he took up the social sciences in his senior year. He praised the study of numbers because the mental discipline acquired in its mastery was useful in argument,¹⁹ but it was in courses in De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and in Sturte-

¹⁶ Paul Russell Anderson, "Hiram K. Jones and Philosophy at Jacksonville," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XXXIII, 478-520; Charles H. Rammelkamp, *Illinois College: A Centennial History, 1829-1929* (New Haven, 1928), p. 253.

¹⁷ *Illinois College Rambler*, October, 1878.

¹⁸ William Jennings Bryan, "Prince of Peace," *The Speeches of William Jennings Bryan*, II, 282.

¹⁹ *Rambler*, October 24, 1896.

vant's *Economics* that he really felt at home. He valued the study of languages for the training it gave in the choice of words and for the acquaintance it gave with the derivation of words, but it is worth stressing that the only course in which he got one hundred was the course in Ethics. At graduation he was an unrivalled first in the social sciences. The school paper, the *College Rambler*, claimed him "the acknowledged hero of his class" because he had received one hundred in moral philosophy.²⁰

Bryan's scholastic honors were won by consistent industry and uniform application rather than by exceptional brilliance. He made a really good showing only in his senior year, when he ranked first in five courses, second in one, and third in another.²¹ Contemporaries noted that he made the fullest use of the advantages offered by the College.²² Although not a profound scholar, he had a wholesome, vigorous mind and a retentive memory. He liked to lead in philosophical and metaphysical discussions, and he was always interested in topics related to political science. For him "getting by" was not enough, said his teachers, who found him respectful and responsive, if not an exemplary student. George R. Poage, head of the history department at Illinois College for several years during the 1920's, made a careful survey of the school's records and reached the following conclusion regarding Bryan as a student:

The official record, together with such scraps of evidence as are available, justifies the conclusion which Bryan's subsequent career goes far to confirm. He did not acquire knowledge with facility, but he was conscientious and industrious in painstaking study. He did not take naturally to books, and probably did not love learning for its own sake. He loved men rather than scholarship, learning from observation more than from reading. His magnificent physical endowment enabled him to 'grind' and still have a surplus energy for outside interests. The motives of his laborious application probably were a strong sense of duty, a desire to excel in college, and ambition for (his) future career . . .²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1881.

²¹ *Illinois College Student Records*, 1853-1888.

²² Jeremiah Donahue, in *Rambler*, October 24, 1896; Julian Wadsworth, "William Jennings Bryan '81—College Days," *Illinois College Alumni Quarterly*, XV, 11.

²³ George R. Poage, "College Career of William Jennings Bryan," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XV, 172.

William had agreed to keep accounts and make reports to his father whenever he needed more money. An entry in the account book of "forty cents for blacking, bay rum, etc." followed by one of "to the church, five cents," elicited from the Judge the comment that his son seemed to be travelling toward the Dead Sea pretty fast.²⁴ When William wrote that his trousers were too short and asked for money with which to buy a new pair so that he could appear more presentable at the church sociables, the father answered that vacation time was close at hand and he could wait and purchase them when he came home, adding, "My son, you may well learn now that people will measure you by the length of your head, rather than by the length of your breeches."²⁵ After two years at college and many summers on the farm William had developed physically into a man. He wanted to be as tall as his father, and to weigh one hundred and eighty pounds. When he returned to Salem for the summer of 1877 he was almost as tall as the Judge but four pounds lighter. "I shall soon be as heavy as you are," said William. "When you have four more pounds of brains," countered the father, "we will weigh the same."²⁶

Although William Jennings possessed the physical requirements, he would not take time for organized sports beyond an occasional foot race, baseball or football game. He enjoyed horseback riding, skating and jumping, and won a prize as a broad-jumper, but he preferred to win his prizes on the platform rather than in the stadium. A prize always fired his ambition: he occasionally dreamed about winning a contest and receiving the victor's award. Ample contests were afforded him. In addition to the annual prize exhibitions for each class—declamations for plebes and freshmen, essays for sophomores, and orations for juniors and seniors—there were the weekly college rhetorical and the weekly meetings and annual contests of the literary societies. Every student had to belong to a literary society. Bryan was elected to Sigma Pi soon after his arrival at Whipple, and

²⁴ Bryan, *Memoirs*, pp. 54-5.

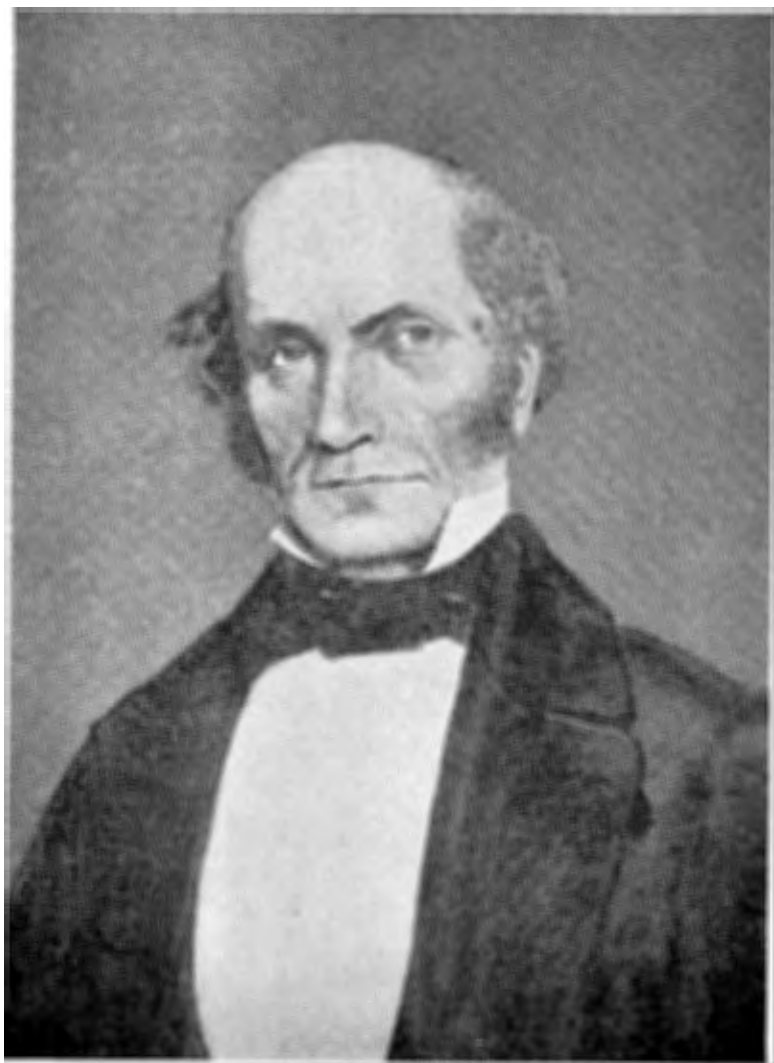
²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.



(Courtesy, The Illinois State Historical Society.)

MARIAH ELIZABETH BRYAN



(Courtesy, The Illinois State Historical Society.)

SILAS L. BRYAN

for six years participated in "the field." He "did himself and the society credit" with his first declamation before the group.²⁷ A fraternity brother, Richard Yates, later governor of Illinois, thought him "simply sublime" when he declaimed Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death."²⁸ The records of Sigma Pi, the *Rambler*, and the Jacksonville press contain many complimentary references to Bryan as an essayist, declaimer, debater and orator. He shared the Latin prose award as a freshman and won second prize as a declaimer. He also received first prize for an essay on "Labor." As a junior he was judged the best orator in the college and went to represent it at the Interstate Oratorical Association contest held at Galesburg, Illinois, in October, 1880. There he placed second, was selected an alternate for the 1881 contest, and was also elected vice-president of the association. In the latter capacity he was responsible for arranging for the association contest of 1881, which would be held at Jacksonville. Upon his return from Galesburg he was acclaimed the campus hero. He was to Illinois College what Albert J. Beveridge was to De Pauw and Robert LaFollette was to Wisconsin University. At graduation, with his mother, brother Russell, and girl friend in the audience, he delivered both the class oration and the valedictory address.

The questions debated at Sigma Pi during the years from 1875-1881 reflect the issues which confronted the nation. Should the Indian Territory be opened to white settlement? Is free trade beneficial to the United States? Does Grant's administration entitle him to a third term? Should the state regulate the liquor traffic? Is the Government justified in sending troops to the Southern States? Is paper money the currency best adapted to the needs of the country? Is the Greenback party a blessing to the United States? Should Garfield or Hancock be the next president? The Sigma Pi *Minutes* and the *Rambler* record Bryan's views on these

²⁷ Sigma Pi *Minutes*, January 14, 1876.

²⁸ Richard Yates, "Address at the Jacksonville Centennial, October 6, 1925," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XVIII, 595.

questions. In April of 1877 the question debated was "That the United States Should Abolish All Protective Duties." The recording secretary of Sigma Pi noted: "Bryan, in the course of the debate, brought down the house by saying, 'The President of the College is for free trade, our ex-President is for free trade, and I, myself, am for F. T.'"²⁹ Using poor diction, the secretary stated that Bryan, in justifying the course of the workingmen in the Great Strike of 1877, "made a pathetic address (which) moved us all to tears."³⁰ After a debate on the greenback question the secretary became facetious: "We then decided that hard money was best adapted to our wants, which no doubt will have marvelous influence upon those controlling such affairs."³¹ Years later, when Bryan was accused of being a Greenbacker before he became a Democrat, he said that he had read in the Bible that the truth was revealed even unto babes.³²

Bryan did not limit himself to serious political and moral questions. Upon occasion he rendered "The Burning of Chicago," "True Eloquence," and Henry Clay's "Ambition of a Statesman." When in a really cheerful mood he regaled his friends with "You Would Scarce Expect One of My Age to Speak in Public on the Stage," and "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck Eating Peanuts by the Peck."

Neither did he limit himself to talking politics. When home on vacation, he decided to attend the national convention of 1876. His parents were visiting the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia at the time, but he sold some corn for cash and made the trip to St. Louis. A friendly policeman allowed him to enter the hall through a window in time to hear John Kelley make his famous speech against Tilden. The national election and the passage of one of Bland's free silver coinage bills kept Sigma Pi in ferment that winter. The greenback and tariff issues were the major bones of contention for 1879. By 1880 Bryan was ready to

²⁹ Sigma Pi *Minutes*, February 16, 1877.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, September 21, 1877.

³¹ *Ibid.*, November 23, 1877.

³² Fred Emory Haynes, *James Baird Weaver* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1919), p. 414.

take the stump in a presidential campaign.

During his junior year, 1879-80, Bryan hit his stride: his grades began to improve, he became a recognized orator, he climbed to high positions in Sigma Pi, and he met his girl. The only sorrow of the year came from the death of his father. The Judge had begun to suffer from diabetes and dyspepsia in middle age. Feeling ill during the early months of 1880, he had gone to Dr. Jones' to receive treatment and to visit with William. On Monday morning, March 29, he suffered a paralytic stroke. He was in his fifty-eighth year. Mariah, hurriedly summoned, arrived within a half hour of his death, and on the next day she and William accompanied the body to Salem.

Local newspapers mirrored the heartfelt loss of a noble citizen and benefactor of mankind. The shadow of his death cast a gloom over all southern Illinois. A crowd followed the body from the depot to the Bryan homestead: thousands viewed it while it lay in state at the county courthouse. Before his death the Judge had chosen the Psalm, text, and hymns for his funeral rites, which were performed in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The casket was carried by six of the outstanding lawyers and judges of the State.³³

Only a few months before his death, in August, 1879, the Judge, in the presence of Mariah, had dictated to William a will which is a commentary upon the character of the man. He left some cash, his best horse and carriage, and the family piano to Mariah, who was to divide his library and personal belongings among the children. To the children he left "all the residue of my estate real, personal and mixed, to share and share equally." "It is my will," dictated the Judge, "that all my sons and daughters shall receive the highest physical, intellectual and moral education to be had in our generation, and especially the moral and religious education of my children shall be sacredly attended to." To this end, any proceeds from the sale of land and all rents were to be applied to defray educational expenses. In order to keep the family together the Judge provided that the

³³ Marion County *Herald*, March 31, April 23, 1880.

homestead should be maintained intact until all the children were grown to maturity. He had signed security notes, for about fifteen thousand dollars, which the family might have taken legal action to avoid paying. The Judge, however, considered them as binding upon the estate and willed that they be paid as "just debts," and the family refused to deviate from his injunction.³⁴

Shortly before his father's death William had met and fallen in love with Mary Elizabeth Baird, who was attending the Jacksonville Female Academy. She was an ambitious girl, determined to make the most of college and of life in general. She had heard from a maiden aunt who knew the Joneses about "a splendid young man" named Bryan. She saw him for the first time when he entered the parlors of the Jail for Angels, as the academy was popularly called. She thought him attractive. His face was pale and thin, his nose a bit prominent, his lips thin and chin square. His eyes, keen and dark, looked out from beneath heavy brows. Mary noted particularly his hair and his smile: "The former, black in color, fine in quality, and parted distressingly straight; the latter, expansive and expressive." In later years the "Bryan smile" became a subject of considerable comment. According to Mary, "No one has ever seen the real breadth of his smile who did not see it in the early days," and she took exception to the critic's "heartless" remark that Bryan could whisper in his own ear.³⁵

About a year after they had met Mary got into trouble because she took buggy rides with William with her mother's approval but without that of the school authorities. William visited the Bairds to explain the situation and to request permission for an engagement. Holding Mary's hand he fumbled nervously while seeking an appropriate opening. Characteristically he turned to the Scriptures. "Mr. Baird," he said, "I have been reading Proverbs a good deal lately and find that Solomon says 'Whoso findeth a wife findeth

³⁴ The will is on file in the Marion County courthouse, Salem, Illinois.

³⁵ Bryan, *Memoirs*, pp. 222-23.

a good thing and obtaineth favor of the Lord.'” “Yes, I believe Solomon did say that,” replied Mr. Baird, who was also a student of the Bible, “but Paul suggests that ‘he that giveth her in marriage doeth better.’” William was stumped for a few moments. Then with a flash of inspiration he countered: “Solomon would be the best authority upon this point because Paul was never married while Solomon had a number of wives.” Mr. Baird took an immediate liking to William and approved of the engagement.³⁶

Although William did not have to work in order to support himself at college he would not use his father’s money to buy gifts for a girl friend. He therefore took after-school jobs in local stores and spent the income for presents for Mary, to whom he also gave several of the prizes he won as an orator. Immediately after winning the second prize, fifty dollars, in the Galesburg contest in October, 1880, he wrote Mary, with a note of humility evident despite justifiable pride:

The prize is won . . . and I do not feel as I thought I would. I prayed that humility might be given with success. My prayer is answered, for I cannot feel that I am anything more than I was before, and as I look over the possibilities in life, I can honestly ask in the language of Lincoln’s favorite hymn, ‘Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?’ If one obtains the highest position to which an American can aspire, he can return thanks to God, for He gives both talents and favorable circumstances, and commands that both should be used. What honor then if one does all that he possibly can! He only does his duty.³⁷

With the prize money he bought a ring, a garnet set in gold, and upon his return to Jacksonville slipped it onto the fourth finger of Mary’s left hand.

The marriage, consummated in 1884, was to be an unending romance, as beautiful as that of William and Ida McKinley, of Theodore and Edith Roosevelt and of Woodrow and Eleanor Wilson, as nearly a perfect union as could be made, with the partners matched physically and intel-

³⁶ William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle: A Study of the Campaign of 1896* (Chicago, 1896), p. 38.

³⁷ W. J. Bryan to Mary E. Baird, October 17, 1880 (letter in possession of Mrs. Ruth Bryan Rohde).

lectually and in tastes and temperaments.³⁸ Many years later Colonel House congratulated Bryan on having such a fine wife. "Your marriage was a great romance," said the Colonel. "Still is," replied Bryan with a grin.³⁹ Bryan gladly confessed his indebtedness to Mary Baird for valuable counsel given throughout his political career.

Pursuit of lady love interfered little with another Bryan love—politics. In 1880 he was able to "withstand the temptation" which had "overpowered" him four years earlier, when he had attended the St. Louis convention, but he compensated for not going to Cincinnati by taking an active part in politics in both the Salem and Jacksonville areas. During the summer he stumped Marion County for William M. Springer, of the Thirteenth, Illinois;⁴⁰ during the fall he worked hard for Hancock at Jacksonville. He was elected to both the committee on permanent organization and the executive committee of Salem's Hancock and English Club.⁴¹ A newspaper reported that he made a masterly effort which would have done credit to a much older head when he spoke at the Salem courthouse.⁴² When he agreed to speak at a gathering near Jacksonville, upon his return to school, one Timothy Flynn was astonished when Bryan refused a nip from a hip flask before speaking, saying, dubiously, "Well, do the best you can anyhow. You can give 'em hell—there ain't a Republican in the audience." Flynn introduced Bryan with the words, "Mr. O'Brien will no spake."⁴³

In a speech called "A Defense of Democracy," which he delivered in the college chapel in January, 1881, Bryan revealed his dismay at the defeat of Hancock and told the

³⁸ Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1936), pp. 41, 52.

³⁹ J. C. Long, *Bryan, The Great Commoner* (New York, 1928), p. 17.

⁴⁰ When, as a first-term Congressman, Bryan helped Springer in the Speakership contest of the 52d Congress, Springer, who had studied law under Judge Bryan and was personally friendly to William, was instrumental in getting Bryan appointed to the Ways and Means committee.

⁴¹ *Marion County Herald*, July 25, 1880.

⁴² Clipping in Bryan, *Salem Scrapbook*, at the Bryan Museum, Salem, Illinois.

⁴³ *Jacksonville Journal*, June 4, 1925.

students what he considered to be solid Democratic dogma. "We who have exhibited a patience of twenty years duration," said the twenty year old youth, "can well afford to wait until the Republican party finds its death from suicide; but *duty* calls upon us to defend by word and act the principles which we believe." The principles of the Democracy, which he undoubtedly took from the national platforms of 1876 and 1880, included the Jeffersonian tenet of the rule of the people, a dislike of "one man power", opposition to the waving of the bloody-shirt, the superiority of the civil to military rule, the separation of church and state, a close following of the Constitution, and intellectual and moral development as the only safeguard against corruption.⁴⁴

Bryan's ability as a speaker did not enable him to win election to all the campus offices to which he aspired. He was elected vice president of the freshman class and valedictorian and orator of the class of '81. He was financial manager and associate editor of the *Rambler*. He filled the offices of sergeant-at-arms, chaplain, critic and vice president, but was president for only five weeks. It has been suggested that a movement to keep Bryan out of the presidency for a full term was fomented by an unidentified personal enemy and that evidence of incapacity as an executive contributed to his fall.⁴⁵ His failure to become president of Sigma Pi, Bryan confessed to a close friend, hurt him deeply.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, said the class poet:

Accustomed to dispute, with all compete,
He's learned to act in victory or defeat.⁴⁷

At graduation the class historian said that Bryan meant to make the law his vocation, that he intended later to court politics, and that prospects of matrimony were in the offing.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Bryan *Papers*, Bryan Museum, Salem, Illinois.

⁴⁵ Poage, "College Career of William Jennings Bryan," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XV, 180-81.

⁴⁶ Wadsworth, "William Jennings Bryan, '81—College Days," *Illinois College Alumni Quarterly*, XV, 12.

⁴⁷ *Rambler*, June 4, 1881.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

A bogus program summarized the worst his detractors thought about him: it mentioned his propensity for buggy riding with Mary, for eating peanuts, and for sermonizing, his inordinate ambition, and his failure as a practical politician to become president of Sigma Pi.⁴⁹ The whole thing smacked of animosity rather than of good-natured fun. No act criticized, however, could be stigmatized as proceeding from an illegitimate objective.

Bryan had come to Jacksonville as an awkward middler of fifteen; he left six years later a confident young man. His belief in himself, in democracy and in God had been strengthened by the intellectual and religious surroundings of the college and the town, and by the time he was graduated he had formed the mental and moral attitudes which remained, with little modification, those of his manhood. He had a pleasing personality, a fairly handsome face, a magnificent physique and a voice holding promise of remarkable depth, resonance and carrying power. He was clean, hungry and playful, a fair athlete and a good sport, a conscientious, painstaking student. Gregarious by nature, he carried his share in his literary society, in the church, in the YMCA, in the city mission and in organized politics. To a large extent the issues which he later brought to the public's attention, outlined in the political and economic struggles of the decades following the Civil war, he had already discussed in Sigma Pi, and to their solution he brought an insight into the mind of the farmer obtained by acquaintance with the farmers of Salem and Jacksonville.

His college years strengthened the purpose to which he meant to dedicate his life. Since he was twelve he had wanted to be a lawyer and a public man. About a year before graduation he wrote to Mary Baird in an autobiographical manner:

His future I cannot tell. Law will be his profession; his aim to mete justice to every creature, whether he be rich or poor His great desire is to honor God and please mankind. He does not desire to be wealthy, believing that

⁴⁹ A copy of the bogus program is preserved in the archives of Illinois College.

money fails to bring happiness as soon as it is made the object of pursuit. Yet by willing labor he hopes and expects to be able to provide for himself and one more. Do not laugh when he tells you that he desires to stand with Webster and Clay. Noble aims make noble men, and his father, who still lives to aid him, often said that one could by diligence, make himself just what he wished to be, and that our duty was to make ourselves worthy of any office within the gift of the people.⁵⁰

Bryan had spent the Thanksgiving holidays of 1880 with Mary at her home in Perry. When, at the end of his visit, she was driving him to the station in her father's phaeton, there occurred the incident which caused her to say that the epitome of his life could be expressed by saying, "I must go back. He needs my help." At the foot of a particularly bad hill they encountered a man trying to repair a broken harness. Bryan said, "Wait a minute. I had better help that man." Mary replied, "Don't bother him. I know the family. They are shiftless. You would waste your time." Driving on, Mary noticed that her "pale, slender youth" was getting increasingly uneasy. Then Bryan said, "Stop, please, I must go back. He needs me." He jumped out of the phaeton and went back to help repair the harness. While he worked, recalled Mary, the "all too short hours of our visit passed."⁵¹ When Mary had to decide whether or not to become engaged to William, some of her schoolmates had commented that he was "too good". Mary, however, decided that she preferred to marry a man who was "too good" rather than one "not good enough."

A strong sense of personal uprightness and of Christian morality marked Bryan as a youth. His major orations, for example, were on "Individual Power," "Justice," "Vigilance," "Master Motives," "Perfection," and "Character." His chosen companions on the campus were only those of quiet and studious tastes. "Morally," said a classmate, "he was a thorough Christian—generous, kind, charitable, and having no bad habits."⁵² "He was very good," said another, "but

⁵⁰ Bryan, *Memoirs*, p. 227.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁵² Granville Hulett, clipping from *Illinois State Register*, in *Illinois Scrapbook*, II, Illinois State Historical Society.

for some reason Bryan's goodness was not the kind that rubbed against you and turned the fur the wrong way."⁵³ A professor remembered that "His young women friends were the nicest girls in town."⁵⁴ He was not ashamed to carry his Bible under his arm. He displayed deep religious conviction and was constant in his attendance at church. He taught a Sunday school class and became superintendent of the Sunday school. A lifetime acquaintance considered him "always distinctly spiritual in his thought." Bryan's outstanding characteristic was his "moral power." He was always "tremendously in earnest."⁵⁵

While in college Bryan and his intimate friend, Julian Wadsworth, would occasionally take long buggy-rides out into the country, discussing their hopes and problems. On one of these rides, Wadsworth confided a secret to Bryan. He had felt, he said, a solemn call to the ministry. Bryan congratulated him and in turn revealed that he too for some time had felt that God was calling him, not to the ministry, but to a calling no less sacred—that of a Christian politician, a Christian statesman. He was going to devote his life to being a Christian statesman.⁵⁶

I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,
O'er mountain or plain or sea,
I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord,
I'll be what you want me to be.

⁵³ Jeremiah Donahue, in *Rambler*, October 24, 1896.

⁵⁴ Dr. Henry E. Storrs to G. R. Poage, July 27, 1925, in Poage, "College Career of William Jennings Bryan," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XV, 179.

⁵⁵ George H. Wilson, in *Centennial Celebration of the Founding of Illinois College*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Wadsworth, "William Jennings Bryan, '81—College Days," *Illinois College, Alumni Quarterly*, XV, 12. This is substantiated in an interview by the author with Mrs. Julian S. Wadsworth, Jacksonville, Illinois, June 30, 1947.