



## A Cuban View of William Jennings Bryan

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Article Summary: Marquez Sterling, Cuban Minister to Brazil, included a report of his 1910 encounter with William Jennings Bryan in a 1958 edition of *Los Ultimos Dias del Presidente Madero* (The Last Days of President Madero), the translation of which is the content of this article. Sterling describes Bryan as an eccentric, condescending man.

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## A CUBAN VIEW OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BY STANLEY R. ROSS

EDITORIAL Porrua, a leading publisher in Mexico City, recently issued a new edition of *Los Ultimos Dias del Presidente Madero* (*The Last Days of President Madero*), the account of his diplomatic mission in Mexico by the Cuban literary figure and diplomat, Manuel Marquez Sterling.<sup>1</sup> Quite appropriately, the major portion of the volume is devoted to the moving story of the Cuban's relentless, but fruitless, efforts to save the life of the doomed Mexican executive. However, the initial chapters, relating Marquez Sterling's diplomatic experiences in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru contain an episode of interest to students of American history in general and to Nebraskans in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> The original edition was published in Havana in 1917.

*Dr. Stanley R. Ross is associate professor of history at the University of Nebraska. During the course of research in Mexico City under a Rockefeller Grant, Dr. Ross turned up the Bryan item which is the subject of this article.*

Early in 1910 Marquez Sterling assumed his post as Cuban Minister to Brazil. Jose Maria da Silva Paranhos, Baron of Rio Branco, was Brazilian Chancellor or Foreign Minister, a post which he had occupied with distinction for almost eight years. It was presidential election year in Brazil, and the people fought with ballots for two candidates: the more distinguished, the outstanding diplomat Ruy Barbosa and the stronger, Hermes da Fonseca. From the prevailing atmosphere of bitterness and dispute the Brazilian people were distracted by the visit of a strange personage, "a master at losing presidential elections without a complaint."

The Cuban diplomat's account of his encounter with William Jennings Bryan and his description and evaluation of the American political leader follows:<sup>2</sup>

In Petropolis I met Mr. William Jennings Bryan, who was travelling on vacation through South America and came, a defeated candidate, his mind filled with noble memories. The Ambassador of the United States, Mr. Dudley, worthy diplomat, sturdy as an oak, deceased later at the height of his success and of life, entertained Mr. Bryan in what had been the Palace of Princess Isabel with a dance worthy of imperial recollection. Since some indiscreet person asked whether that homage would please Mr. Taft, whose rival Mr. Bryan had been, the calm ambassador answered: "My guest has one of the most extraordinary talents in my country. In spite of his theories his prodigious speech won for him four million votes for the Presidency of the United States. And this Embassy is never more fortunate than when it receives and entertains a pride of the country and the favorite of four million of his fellow citizens." Fleshy and clean-shaven face; long, winding locks of discolored hair; round, roving eyes; regular stature; bulging stomach; long and heavy legs. That is Mr. Bryan: old dress coat, old shirt collar, badly tied tie, shoes with double sole. He wants to talk, to talk much, to talk all the time. His mind does not support the anguish of silence. And he talks everywhere, with everyone and about everything, in pursuit of his singular philosophy. The

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<sup>2</sup> The translation has been made from the new edition. Manuel Marquez Sterling, *Los Ultimos Dias del Presidente Madero* (Mexico City, 1958), pp. 34-37.

Chancellor, at a banquet which he offers him, and at which I occupy the right of Mr. Bryan, toasts in correct English and takes advantage of the most happy occasion to reveal himself an admirer of the people, the great men and the great political institutions of the United States. The Yankee guest refuses the goblet of champagne, essentially diplomatic, and requests for his toast a small pitcher of fresh water. Suddenly he lowers his voice in order to pierce my ear with this dart: "I crossed the Cuban territory to Santiago, almost the entire island; I greeted the glorious dawn in Caney; then I continued to Jamaica and Panama. *Mr. Minister*: the renewed lottery is a step backwards and it horrifies me." At that moment a Brazilian pie crust tasted bitter to me; the languid orchestra was playing the devilish music of a pretty *matchicha* [a Brazilian dance]; and, with controlled visage, I let pass that inopportune reproach which contained such sad truth; but Mr. Bryan scratched his ear and added with mellifluous tone: "Cuba will be a model for republics, and I love her tenderly." Standing, his napkin on one hand, the other one still as stone, he delivered a speech on a difficult theme: his electoral fiascos, a theme which would have made Sr. Barbosa jump and which, in the name of Mr. Taft and honoring four million fellow citizens, Mr. Dudley applauded. I closed my eyelids and I could imagine myself beneath the vaulted arch of a Presbyterian church listening to a sainted pastor.

Rio Branco was not a devotee of protocol, with the result that he was always at fault: absorbed with ideas, he forgot the ceremonies. But Mr. Bryan, while a person of singular simplicity, is, nevertheless, another type. His catechumenical courtesy is the opposite of the diplomatic instinct. The dinner guests are startled by his eccentric smartness, now rising to his level of prodigy and then, with serious countenance talking down to his listeners. One is not dealing with a politician, nor even with an expert in the daily struggle. Bryan had not been a councilman in his youth, judge and tamer of the Tagals like Taft; inspector of police like Roosevelt; governor like Wilson; member of the Senate like McKinley; cabinet member before being candidate like Buchanan; or candidate with the attraction of an illustrious career like Henry Clay. Mr. Bryan owes his political fortune to the triumph of a speech at the Democratic Convention gathered in Chicago in 1896. At such gatherings it is appropriate to raise a din: speeches, debates, mass singing, applause, hooting, shouts, all in prolonged clamor. And, then, Mr. Bryan, journalist without



fame, to many unknown [?] astonishes the audience with his preachment. The delegates, in a fever of enthusiasm, give him their votes. Afterwards, the scene is repeated: his eloquence captivates more than the facts and fascinates four million of his countrymen, thereby obligating Mr. Dudley. A type of fascination which, in the judgment of the severe critic who lists Puritan ancestors, a Quaker grandfather and, perhaps, does not disdain the Mormon relative who at Salt Lake kneeled before the patriarchal purple, only should be effective among us because of our Spanish blood, our scholastic classrooms and our Helenic preferences. Once again Mr. Bryan kisses the dust of defeat and still is disposed to undertake again the battle. He loves Cuba tenderly, but it is because Cuba represents in his ethical "system" anticipated fruit and a pledge of better times and reasoning. When the flag of his ancestors was struck at the Morro Castle of Havana, Bryan, who was present, waved his straw hat in the air because he envisaged the flag being raised "in the heart of the Cubans." Love is, in his doctrine, the source of good and happiness. It is justice and, besides, the wheat and the lentils. It is the salvation of souls and the peace of peoples. Through his mind, like that of the artist, have passed the ages and canvases of human sorrow throughout history: the swords which bury their cruel points in the conquered; the legendary king standing before the tomb of his victims; the satrap with his claw in the breast of the tormented subject; the merchant making slaves of his customers and arming the arm of the *caudillos* [leaders]; and between the fires of heaven and the vale of tears on earth, the redeeming cross teaching angry men the first lesson of love. That is the source of his ethic, born of sentiment and projected as the supreme and unappealable law of nations. An ethic more fruitful than the other extinct ethic, originated in the despoil, fragile protection of the small against the large, miserable boundary of the weak against the strong. . .

Mr. Bryan returns to talking down to his listeners.