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Article Summary: When he founded *The Commoner*, Bryan sought the technical knowledge of Orlando Jay Smith. Smith's advice on printing processes and content helped shape the weekly journal.

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WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, ORLANDO JAY  
SMITH, AND THE FOUNDING OF *THE*  
*COMMONER*: SOME NEW BRYAN LETTERS

EDITED BY

ROBERT F. HIMMELBERG AND  
RAYMOND J. CUNNINGHAM

**I**N January, 1901, seemingly undaunted by a crushing defeat in his campaign for the Presidency, William Jennings Bryan published the first number of *The Commoner*, a weekly journal devoted to the editor's conception of "Jeffersonian Democracy." In his unaccustomed journalistic role, Bryan sought out the technical knowledge of his friend, Orlando Jay Smith (1842-1908), president and general manager of the American Press Association (A.P.A.), whose advice helped shape the character of *The Commoner*. The perfecting of the stereotype process in 1871 led to the emergence of news and feature syndicates in the last quarter of the century, one of the most important being the A.P.A. Established in 1882 by Smith and two associates for the distribution of stereotype news

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plates, the A.P.A. quickly built up a large following among the smaller daily and weekly papers which lacked the advantage of a wire service.<sup>1</sup>

Born near Terre Haute, Indiana in 1842, Smith graduated from Asbury (later De Pauw) University and served in the Civil War as an enlisted man and as an officer. Before the founding of the A.P.A. he edited several mid-western newspapers. A man of strong convictions, Smith wrote a number of books on religious and political questions. No fundamentalist, he was nevertheless, like Bryan, a vehement critic of scientific materialism, advancing in its stead his distinctive doctrine of "eternalism," which rested on a theory of reincarnation.<sup>2</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Smith was unfavorably impressed by the control exercised by special economic interests and machine politics over municipal, state and national government. Like them too, he had great faith in the possibilities of improved political techniques. In this area, Smith urged proportional representation for major and minor parties and the "free man's ballot" for the citizenry, by which each voter would choose his own candidates for local, state and federal offices free from dictation by the party machine.

On the great question of monopoly, Smith advocated public ownership of "those industries and things which are clearly monopolizable in their nature, and notably the urban and suburban land, and the property of the great trusts," while "the industries open to free competition should be in no sense interfered with by the state."<sup>3</sup> Smith's outlook was characterized by an unquenchable optimism that must have approved itself to the "Great

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), 141, 151.

<sup>2</sup> See Orlando J. Smith, *Eternalism: A Theory of Infinite Justice* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1902).

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *The Coming Age of Democracy* (New York: The Brandur Co., 1900), 152.

Commoner." "Under the Coming Democracy," he prophesied in 1900, "public and private enterprise will work together harmoniously, profit being wholly eliminated in the one, and deprived of the possibility of extortion in the other."<sup>4</sup>

Smith's influence upon the establishment of *The Commoner* does not appear to have been great, but was significant enough to deserve not to go unrecorded. It seems a fair inference to suppose, at any rate, that Smith himself would have been gravely disappointed at finding his role in *The Commoner's* founding forgotten. The brief account of Smith's life provided by an anonymous writer in the *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*<sup>5</sup> made Smith the virtual founder of the newspaper. It was Smith who "was engaged to set it up," in this version, Smith, "who named the paper the 'Commoner,'" and who "engaged the personnel and had it operating before turning it over to Mr. Bryan." It seems likely that this assessment represents, in part at least, Smith's own recollection of his role in setting up *The Commoner*, as he imparted it to the friend or relation who supplied the information for the *Cyclopedia* account. If so, Smith probably would have welcomed the publication of these letters, albeit they reveal the claims of the *Cyclopedia* biography as exaggerated.

The following letters, all from Bryan to Smith, were found among Smith's papers, in the possession of his granddaughter, Mrs. William O. Melvin.<sup>6</sup> To the eight letters bearing on the origins and early history of *The Commoner* (dated between November 17, 1900, and March 25, 1901) are added three additional letters written in 1905, the only other Bryan letters yet discovered in the Smith papers. Though these latter three letters throw no additional light on the immediate circumstances surrounding the founding of *The Commoner*, they do contain

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* XXIV (1935), 175.

<sup>6</sup> The Bryan letters here published are now in the possession of the authors.

further indication of the mutual esteem in which Bryan and Smith held one another.

The eight letters bearing on the establishment of *The Commoner* reveal Smith as having played a fairly important role as technical adviser and moral supporter in that enterprise, a role which has been heretofore unrecorded in the Bryan literature. Aside from this addition, the contents of the letters modify or supplement very little the history of the founding of *The Commoner* as given in the first volume of Paola Coletta's Bryan biography,<sup>7</sup> the highly regarded standard source for Bryan's life through 1908. Coletta's sources on the founding of *The Commoner* however, as far as he documents them at least, are in great part the oral recollections of an individual who, one presumes, was a member of Bryan's staff in 1901. Documentary evidence corroborating and supplementing Coletta's account is therefore of more than incidental interest.

The eight letters concerned with *The Commoner* require little elucidation. According to the letters of November 17, 19 and December 3, 1900, Bryan not only relied upon Smith's advice in certain respects while forming preliminary plans for the paper, but seemingly considered having Smith act as its printer. Well before the letter of December 20, 1900 was written, this possibility had been excluded. The letter of December 20, and the three letters following it at first sight appear difficult to interpret. Their meaning is probably simple however—they are merely Bryan's side of a correspondence dealing with Smith's efforts to supply stereotype cuts for *The Commoner's* front page and editorial page headings. The letters of February 1 and March 25, 1901, contain Bryan's reaction to Smith's criticism of *The Commoner's* early numbers.

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<sup>7</sup> Paola E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: Political Evangelist, 1860-1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 290-292.

The letters follow:

Lincoln, Nebraska

Nov 17—1900

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Your very kind letter rec'd. I have been considering the same thing. It has been my idea for some years to start a paper but I lean toward a *monthly* rather [than] a weekly. Your argument would apply to a monthly as well as to a weekly. I had thought of calling it "The Commoner" and was uncertain as to the place of publication. It might be here, it might be Chicago, Cincinnati, New York or Washington. Are you so situated that you could undertake the mechanical work? I ask because I do not know whether you are in [a] position to do printing press work. I take it for granted that you employ union labor. I am thinking of taking an extended trip abroad leaving about the last of May or the first of June & may be gone a year but by contributing articles on my trip my absence might not injure the paper. Can you give me your opinion on the name, the character (whether a monthly would do as well as a weekly) the cost & whether you could get out the paper for me in case it [sic] was located at N.Y. or at some place where you have a branch house. And by the way, at what points are you prepared to do printing? I remember the interest you manifested in our course seven years ago before most people realized the magnitude of our fight, and it has been gratifying to know that you have not lost your personal interest in my welfare.

My regards to Mrs. Smith.

Yours truly,

W.J. Bryan

P.S. I do not want it known that I am going abroad. I will let you know later whether it is worth while for you to come West.

Lincoln, Nebraska

Nov 19—1900

My Dear Mr. Smith—

I enclose a paper published at Chicago. What would be the cost of such a paper issued monthly (including cost of paper, printing & mailing). The more I think about the matter I am inclined to the monthly idea.

Yours truly

W.J. Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

Dec 3—1900

My Dear Mr. Smith—

I have about decided to follow your advice & issue a weekly paper & would like to announce it soon. You offered to visit me in Chicago & talk the matter over. I can not come to Chicago without attracting attention. If you can conveniently come to Lincoln, I should be glad to pay the expenses for if I meet you in Chicago it would cost me as much to go to Chicago & [as?] it will cost you from Chicago here. If you can get here for next Sunday or Monday I shall withhold notice until after you arrive. Please wire me whether you can come. If it is not convenient for you to come now I can meet you in Chicago on Jan 8th & in the mean time can go ahead with preparations. The name selected for the paper is "The Commoner" and it will advocate Jeffersonian democracy.

Yours truly,

W.J. Bryan

When I am ready I shall give out a full statement to the Ass'd Press.

Lincoln, Nebraska

Dec 20—1900

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Your favor at hand. We are all pleased with the heading and you can send it at once in electrotype if you will. I am greatly obliged to you for the suggestion & will announce that I am indebted to you for the suggestion unless you think it might be detrimental to you among republican patrons in a business way.

Just send the large heading:

The Commoner

The date line will have to be changed weekly.

I have decided to put the name in the date line (instead of below) like the enclosed.<sup>8</sup> The name will be printed William J. Bryan & the type will be a little larger than enclosed but not quite so large as you made it.

I have put you down as a subscriber with compliments of the editor. Do you want [the] paper sent to you at your office or at your home? Mail brought in 14 subscribers Monday, 38 Tuesday & a little more than 100 Wednesday [.]. By Saturday night [a] clubbing offer will be mailed to all reform weeklies. Have 20,000 precinct committeemen to send to next.

Yours

Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

[no date]

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Can you send me at once an electroplate of the folio, same stile [sic] as front heading but smaller. I enclose sample to give you my idea of size. If you can send me

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<sup>8</sup> The enclosure is a narrow strip of newsprint imprinted with a sample dateline. On the left appears "William J. Bryan, Editor and Publisher." In the center, the place and date, "Lincoln, Nebraska, January 22, 1901." And on the right, "Vol. I, No. 1." Bryan subsequently revised the form of the dateline. *The Commoner's* first issue bore Bryan's name, as "Editor and Proprietor," at the head of the first column rather than in the dateline.

one plate at once we can make duplicates. Wire on receipt of this whether you can do it so that we can make other arrangements if you can not. Saturday night subscriptions had gone above 5500 [.] First issue will appear Jany. 23d [.] We feel very much encouraged by [the] outlook. The Western Newspaper Union will do the mechanical work at present.

Yours

Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

Jany 18, 1901

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Your favor at hand. I will take the smaller cut. Think it looks better. Am much obliged to you for attending to the matter & will be glad to send you [the] amount they cost. The subscriptions are now nearly 11,000 & at the rate they are coming in they may be 13000 before Wednesday. I have asked Charlie<sup>9</sup> to send copies of [the] first page proof to you at New York & to the Am. Press Assn [sic] at Chicago.

Hope you will like the paper.

Yours

Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

Feb 1, 1901

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Our printer says that there was a slight defect in the plates sent & asks me to ask you for duplicates. Perhaps it would be better for us to have the type. So I will ask you to order for us the type for both sizes. Have them packed carefully. I hope you will let me pay for these. I shall feel more free to call on you for small favors if you

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<sup>9</sup>The reference undoubtedly is to Bryan's brother, Charles W. Bryan, who was engaged as the paper's business manager.

will let me pay for them. I note what you say about the paper. I think you will find the subsequent issues more current. I now have a good exchange list & can better keep up with the news. As to the second criticism I think your observations are just. There should have been more on the army bill<sup>10</sup> but I did not have a copy of the bill & did not know who had voted for it. While I do not expect to devote much time to *persons* I shall point out wherein persons do not stand up to the platform. I would not suggest prospective appointments unless I had evidence of it but I shall call attention to the bill and the vote. I receive the Cong [ressional] Record now & one of our congressmen sends me any bills I want.

Yours truly

W.J. Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

Mch 25, 1901

My Dear Mr. Smith—

Am glad you are pleased with the Cleveland editorial. Next weeks [sic] paper will contain a similar one on Hill.<sup>11</sup>

Yours truly

W.J. Bryan

Will have advance copies sent to your House at N.Y. and Chicago. You are welcome to quote anything you like.

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<sup>10</sup> The "army bill" referred to was evidently S. 4300, "To Increase the Efficiency of the Military Establishment of the United States." The bill was debated during the first weeks of the second session of the Fifty-Sixth Congress, the same period in which Bryan was preparing the first number of *The Commoner*. The inaugural, January 23, 1901 issue of *The Commoner* touched upon the pending army bill only through an item reprinted from the *Springfield Register*. The *Register* quote criticized the bill on the ground that it embodied a costly expansion of the army. In the same issue of *The Commoner* an editorial feature reaffirming the platform of 1900 raised the question of militarism, but only in general terms.

<sup>11</sup> *The Commoner's* issues of March 22 and March 29, 1901, carried editorials criticizing ex-President Cleveland and New York Senator David B. Hill, respectively. Both figures had shortly before written public letters renewing, in effect, their hostility to Bryan's brand of Democracy. Cleveland of course worked against Bryan in both 1896 and 1900. Hill was passive in 1896 but had supported the *Commoner* in 1900.

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 15, 1905

Hon. O.J. Smith

New York

My dear Mr. Smith:

I enclose [sic] an article from The Commoner which will explain itself. I do not know whether this will appeal to you or not, but I take the liberty of bringing it to your attention. I do not want you to establish the scholarship unless it appeals to you upon its merits. I would not have you feel under any obligation to do so because I mention it to you, but if you feel that you can spare the money and believe that the matter is meritorious I shall be glad to have you join me and establish a scholarship. This is not a political matter, but I have felt an added interest in our college because the trustees severed the connection between our college and the Rockefeller University at Chicago, and I am anxious to show the trustees that a college does not have to depend upon a few trust magnates for its existence and usefulness. If you feel like establishing more than one scholarship the college will be grateful in proportion.

But whether you become a benefactor to my Alma Mater or not, the latch-string is out for you at Fairview.

Very truly yours

W.J. Bryan

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 30, 1905

Hon. O.J. Smith

New York

My dear Mr. Smith:

Your favor at hand. I very much appreciate the help which you give to Illinois College. I will send your check to the treasurer, and it will pay tuition for two years. As this is returned it can be used over and over again, and I am sure that you will be pleased with the good that it will do.



Orlando Jay Smith



William J. Bryan in front of *The Commoner* office

I am going to get into communication with you so as to spend some days travelling together. I expect to leave New York between the 10th and the 15th of September, and my present plan is to have Mrs. Bryan meet me at Queenstown and go up through Ireland or Scotland and down to London. If you are going to be in Ireland or Scotland about that time we can arrange to make so much of the trip together as suits the plans of both. If you are not going to be in Ireland or Scotland I hope we will reach London before you sail, so that we can have a little visit there, for Mrs, [sic] Bryan finds your wife as congenial a companion as I have found you.

Very truly yours,  
W.J. Bryan

Hotel Linderman

Aug 12, 1905

Clarinda, Iowa

Mr Dear Mr Smith

Your favor just rec'd [.] We have changed our plans. We have decided to start West & visit Asia first so as to reach India before Spring [.] Mrs. Bryan [and?] Grace will return early in September. I will send her your address & hope she may see you & your family if she returns through England. Hope to have a good report to make when I return.

Yours in haste  
W.J. Bryan