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## Article Title: Dan Bride's Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan

Full Citation: Robert W Cherny, ed., "Dan Bride's Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan," *Nebraska History* 66 (1985): 257-271

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1985Bride.pdf>

Date: 3/04/2014

Article Summary: Bride served as William Jennings Bryan's Man Friday throughout much of Bryan's political career. He lived with the Bryan family in Lincoln for more than twenty years and had personal knowledge of his employer's attitudes and activities.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Dan Bride, William Jennings Bryan, Mary Baird Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, John Baird, John M Thurston, Chautauqua, Crown of Thorns speech, Prohibition, Spanish-American War

Place Names: Washington, D. C.; Lincoln, Nebraska

Keywords: Dan Bride, William Jennings Bryan

Photographs / Images: William Jennings Bryan home, Lincoln, about 1896; Bryan home guards marching east along O Street, Lincoln, 1896

# Dan Bride's Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan

*Edited by Robert W. Cherny*

The William Jennings Bryan manuscript collection in the Library of Congress contains two memoirs by Dan Bride, who served Bryan as a Man Friday throughout much of the Commoner's long political career. Bride's uncle lived across from the Library of Congress, near the Capitol; Bride and Bryan met when Bryan rented rooms there while serving in Congress in 1891-1895. Bride later worked for Bryan, and he lived with the Bryan family from 1894 until Bryan's resignation as secretary of state in 1915. After 1915, Bride lived in Washington where he found a position with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), but he remained very close to the Bryan family. He continued with the IRS until two years before his death in 1940.<sup>1</sup>

Information from Bride's two memoirs has been included in several published accounts of Bryan's career, but the two accounts deserve publication in their entirety, as testament to an Irish immigrant's admiration and affection for Nebraska's most famous political figure. Bride's reminiscences are also of interest because some of the opinions Bride expresses in these memoirs may reflect attitudes he absorbed in the Bryan family circle. Bride's views of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson are of special interest in this regard.

The first memoir is dated November 15, 1920, and was written in Washington. Although the memoir carries this date at its head, the last paragraph of the document refers to the recent inauguration of Warren G. Harding (March 1921) and to Bryan's birthday (March 23) as coming in "this month." Perhaps the memoir was begun in November and completed in March. Errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation have been corrected, and a few sentences have been restructured to improve readability.

## FIRST MEMOIR

In the year 1891, I first became acquainted with William Jennings Bryan. He was then serving his first term in Congress

from the State of Nebraska.<sup>2</sup> This was four years after my arrival in this country from the County of Cork, Ireland. [I] made my home with an uncle, Cotter Timothy Bride, at 131 B Street. It was at this house that Congressman Bryan roomed while serving his two terms in Congress.

My health was very poor at this time owing to chills and fever which [were] prevalent in Washington, D.C., at this time, caused by the marshes on the banks of the eastern branch of the Potomac River. In 1894, I decided to return to my home in Ireland with the hope that the voyage would benefit me, so I sailed from New York on board the *Majestic*, White Star Line, on the 13th day of May, 1894. The voyage took eight days as we were in a fog for five days and had to reduce speed for safety. I remained in Ireland until the 4th day of October of that year when I sailed from Queenstown on board the *Teutonic* of the same line, arriving in New York harbor in five days and seventeen hours.

After spending about three weeks in the East (New York, Baltimore, and Washington), I left for Lincoln, Nebraska, to be the guest of Congressman Bryan, hoping that the bracing air of the western climate would fully restore me to health. Liking the West so well and [also liking] the genuine hospitality of the Bryans, I continued to make my home with them, actually feeling as if I were one of the family.

Let me say here that the years [I] spent there were some of the happiest of my life, for I was made to feel at home. That I was of the Roman Catholic faith, and the Bryans were members of the First Presbyterian Church, made not the slightest difference. Their consideration of my religion and my health and happiness took precedence over everything.

Theirs was a Christian home. Every morning before breakfast, which was regularly served at seven-thirty, the family would kneel in prayer in the sitting room. There were no restrictions placed on me as to whether I would join or not. Sometimes I did and sometimes I did not.

The family was comprised of Mr. and Mrs. Bryan, their two daughters, Ruth and Grace, and a son William J., Jr., together with John Baird, Mrs. Bryan's father, who was blind. Mr. Baird was a loveable character. His wife had died shortly after my arrival in Lincoln. I became the bosom friend and



*William Jennings Bryan home, 1625 D Street, Lincoln, about 1896.*

companion of Mr. Baird after his wife's death. Mr. and Mrs. Bryan were away from home a great deal [on speaking engagements around the nation], leaving Mr. Baird and me to keep house.

The family had grown so much in my affections, which were reciprocated, that I actually felt as if I were a member of the family. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bryan claimed me as this. And so the years passed on in this way until the present day.

[I] reached Lincoln in the latter part of October, 1894, when Mr. Bryan was in the midst of his campaign for United States Senator on the Democratic ticket against John M. Thurston, the candidate on the Republican ticket.

[In 1894, United States Senators were still elected by state legislatures. Bryan invoked a rarely used provision of state law to have his name put on the ballot as the Democratic candidate for senate, but the vote he received had no impact on the outcome. Because the election of Senators was determined by the majority of the state legislature, Bryan and Thurston campaigned for the Senate by speaking on behalf of their parties' candidates for the state legislature.]

Not until the Thursday night [following election day] was it known that the majority of the legislature would be Republican, which meant that Mr. Thurston would be elected to the United States Senate. Mr. and Mrs. Bryan, a Mrs. Brown, a neighbor, and I were at the theater that night and while there the result of the election was definitely announced.

On our return home, we went into the sitting room which was dark at the time. I left Mr. and Mrs. Bryan there and started up to my room, but as I got to the foot of the stairway, I heard Mrs. Bryan say, "Will, I want you to grant me one request." He said, "Mary, you know that anything in life that I can do for you, I will gladly do, unless you ask me the impossible." She said she was not going to ask the impossible. He said, "What is it, Mary?"

[Mrs. Bryan replied,]

You know that this political life has taken you away from home a great deal. I can assure you that it is anything but pleasant for me to be left alone most of the time trying to raise a family and bring them up as they should be brought up. Now that you are defeated for the United States Senate, I want you to settle down to the practice of your law and writing. You can make a

comfortable living. It will be more pleasant for you, me, and the whole family.

He replied,

Mary, I admit that all you say is true, but you have asked me the impossible. It would seem to me as if I were born for this life and I must continue to fight the battles of the people, for what I think is right and just, if I have to do so single-handed and alone. I care naught whether I am ever elected to an office or not.

I can listen to the ring of his voice as he uttered those words as clearly as if it were yesterday. One can imagine the impression it made in my mind as a young man as I heard him pronounce the sentence which committed him to such a sacrifice, pledging his life to the cause of humanity.

I often wonder how many of his fellow citizens, to whose cause he is devoting his life's work, appreciate this sacrifice as he goes out in the wilderness of politics, in the highways and by-ways and wicked ways of the politicians, driving them out of the temple of justice and the high places, and establishing the rule of right and righteousness, coming up out of the hearts of the common people who are receiving the truth as they did in the time of Christ.

Mr. Bryan spent 1895 on Chautauqua lecture tours over the country, and writing for magazines and newspapers, and conferring with Democratic politicians all over the country. In the spring of 1896, he delivered several lectures and political speeches on the money question. His last speech before the Chicago [Democratic] convention in 1896 was made at Crete, Nebraska, just two weeks before; it was during this interval that his mother died at her home in Illinois. After the burial of his mother, he attended the convention as a delegate.

There were two sets of delegates from Nebraska, one representing the gold, or Cleveland administration, wing of the party, and the other representing the free silver, or bimetallism, wing of the party, of which Mr. Bryan was a delegate. The goldbug delegates were seated at first, but were unseated later by the Committee on Credentials. This gave Mr. Bryan a voice in the convention proceedings, and he was named a member of the Committee on Resolutions, which was divided on the money question. United States Senator David Bennett Hill of New York presented the majority report in favor of the gold standard in a very able speech which was

answered by Mr. Bryan. [Hill and two other speakers actually presented the minority report, favoring gold, and Bryan and one other defended the committee majority, favoring bimetallism.]

The famous Crown of Thorns speech [usually referred to as the Cross of Gold speech] won the presidential nomination for Bryan, over Mr. Bland of Missouri, the leading candidate, who was also a bimetallist. The history of this convention has been written in so many forms that it is scarcely necessary to allude to it further.

After the nomination, candidate Bryan returned to his old home in Illinois before returning to his home in Lincoln, Nebraska. In the meantime, there were numerous things happening in Lincoln. The afternoon of the nomination, I stood on the sidewalk on O Street, which is the principal business street in Lincoln, and watched the joyful crowds giving vent to their feelings, regardless of class, creed, or political party. The noise they made and the fireworks display that night made a scene long to be remembered. This was only the beginning of five months of excitement.

The citizens gave Bryan a hearty welcome. Committees were named to arrange for the homecoming of the candidate. On that day, special trains were run from all parts of the state and unloaded their crowds until there was scarcely room in the town to accommodate them. The first thing on his arrival home, at 1625 D Street, was an array of newspaper correspondents to interview him, after which dinner was served to the immediate family. That evening [there was] a reception and speechmaking at the State Capitol.

For the next few weeks the Bryan household was a pretty busy place with its force of correspondents taking care of thousands of letters and telegrams arriving daily. There were presents of every imaginable thing from admiring friends all over the nation and foreign nations as well. This kept up during the entire campaign and did not let up after the campaign was over, for Bryan seemed to continue to be the popular ideal of the people. As an illustration, on the three days following his defeat, we received twenty thousand letters and I cannot give any fair estimate of the number of telegrams. I do believe, had he been elected, there could not have been such an outburst of enthusiasm as that displayed by his loving admirers throughout the nation.

Although twenty years have elapsed since the 1896 campaign, Bryan still continues to remain the ideal of the masses, but never of the [upper] classes, who never hesitate to stoop to the meanest and most contemptible lies to try to belittle him in the estimation of the people, but all to no avail.

He has in those twenty-four years accomplished more out of office than all the others have been able to accomplish in office. He advocated and championed the income tax, the direct election of United States Senators (by direct vote of the people, instead of by the [state] legislatures which were controlled by corporation interests), prohibition, and woman suffrage, all by constitutional amendment, together with the Federal Reserve banking system and numerous other reforms such as the initiative and referendum, the [direct] primary system, the abolition of free railroad passes, and others. It was through Mr. Bryan's advocacy of those reforms that others were forced to adopt them because of the public sentiment he aroused throughout the nation on their behalf.

President [Theodore] Roosevelt saw in the Bryan theories a popular move and adopted them as his own, which made him popular with the people but not with the bosses in the Republican party. [This led] consequently to his separation from them and to the organizing of the Bull Moose party. [Bride's original consistently reads "Bull Mouse" party!] As to the authentic proof of the popularity of the Bryan policies, in the 1912 election Roosevelt with his Bull Moose [Progressive] party received 132 electoral votes to 6 electoral votes for William Howard Taft, the regular Republican candidate. Their total vote combined was greater than Woodrow Wilson's popular vote, which showed clearly that Wilson was not a popular candidate. His nomination and election were both accidental, the Bryan influence and following having pulled him through each time.

It can be said by those who followed events closely that, during Roosevelt's second administration, he played to the masses of the people from the grandstand and behind closed doors he dickered with the representatives of Wall Street. In this way, he continued to fool the people for the sake of his own popularity. It was quite evident he was not sincere with either party, except where it concerned Roosevelt and would

accrue to his popularity or benefit politically. Thus he played the game to the end of his string, then passed away to meet the Savior where he would render an account of his stewardship on earth. I trust Saint Peter could say to him, "Well done thou good and faithful servant. You have been faithful [in] your stewardship on earth, I will reward you in Heaven."

Bryan and Roosevelt for twenty years continued to be the popular ideals of the masses of the people of the country, but there was a vast difference between the two men. Bryan was a man of pure and simple Christian sincerity, without any ambition for public popularity except for the good it would bring to humanity, for by this popularity he could reach the people. Roosevelt on the other hand was not sincere inasmuch as he craved popularity for Roosevelt and Roosevelt only. I doubt that Roosevelt would try to sacrifice another to gain that popularity.

While I feel that [Roosevelt] was jealous of Mr. Bryan's popularity, I doubt if he would stoop to the low contemptible things Woodrow Wilson did to rob Mr. Bryan of his popularity. Mr. Bryan on the other hand went about the country praising Wilson and trying to give him the credit for the things that Bryan had accomplished. All this unselfishness on the part of Mr. Bryan was simply done to avoid a split in the Democratic party, for through the Democracy he hoped to accomplish the reforms he still had in mind, together with the protection of the reforms already accomplished. Bryan was more interested in these reforms than in any popularity they might bring him.

[Early in 1919, Bryan was stricken with facial erysipelas while in Washington, and he spent several weeks with the Bride family recuperating.] During his illness at my home in the spring of 1919,<sup>4</sup> I had a better opportunity than at any other time during the thirty years of our acquaintance to study him on this point. In our conversation one day during his convalescence, he said this about the presidency:

Dan, I do not want the Presidency. It means nothing to me and surely could not bring me any more honors than I have already received from the American people. It would mean that I would be tied up in the White House listening to petitions from a lot of people who were not interested in me, except what it meant to them. I can go out about the country free [of official obligations], and talk to the people, and earn one hundred thousand dollars a year. That is twenty-five thousand more than the President receives and I

believe I can do more for the people in this way than I could do for them if I were President, with perhaps a hostile Congress to deal with.

I am thoroughly convinced that his life was put on earth for some great purpose, for surely no other human being without some supernatural power back of him could have accomplished the great things that Mr. Bryan has [done], except having some hidden power. Woe to the man or organization that opposes him. The leaders in the Democratic [party] known as the special privilege class have been trying for twenty years to drive him out of the party. Each time they try, they go down to defeat, defeats that are humiliating. The liquor interests tried to kill him politically and they met their Waterloo. [Prohibition had taken effect shortly before, and Bryan had played a major role in accomplishing it.] Every man who used underhanded methods to drive Bryan out of politics has met with the same fate.

Mr. Harding, a Republican, is now President of the United States, having just been inaugurated. Woodrow Wilson and his followers have met with the most overwhelming defeat, in fact humiliating [defeat], that was ever recorded in the history of the nation. It is no secret that the country is now in the hands of the special interest class for the next four years.

Mr. Bryan is just sixty-one years old the 29th of this month (March, 1921), and as he just said in a letter to me acknowledging my telegram of congratulations, he "is sixty-one, but like the Irishman, is not conscious of it." So we may look for some very interesting events during the next three or four years. Unless I miss my guess, Mr. Bryan is going to play a very important figure during this time. When the Democratic convention convenes I look for him to control that convention.<sup>5</sup>

## SECOND MEMOIR

[Bride's second memoir of Bryan was written shortly after the Commoner's death in 1925. It is more carefully done than the first, requiring less correction of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and word order.]

My associations with William Jennings Bryan covered a period of thirty-five years during which we were almost con-

stantly together. A greenhorn from the Emerald Isle, I met him and his family when he first came to Congress from the First District in Nebraska. From the start, an infatuation sprang up between us, and as weeks, months and years formed our lives, that mutual friendship continued to increase until the end.

I have considered it a great privilege as well as an honor to be so closely associated with America's greatest American. We were both constant and loyal friends. I admired him because I found him the true embodiment of a friend and he never wavered from that friendship. This was not only true in my case, but was also true of his loyalty to his country and the great masses of the common people whom he loved so well and whom he never betrayed. They, as well as I, have lost a constant friend, a friend indeed.

His enemies used tons and tons of printer's ink in ridiculing him, yet he never hit back. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed their scathing criticism. I never saw him discouraged, not even when some of his old time friends deserted him and went over with his enemies.

I remember an incident which took place during the Spanish-American War. [The governor of Nebraska appointed Bryan the colonel of a regiment of Nebraska volunteers; Bride served as Bryan's aide-de-camp.] One day another member of the regiment and I sat in front of the Colonel's tent rolling a sweet morsel of scandal under our tongues, directed at the Major. We did not hear Mr. Bryan come up back of us until too late. He stepped in front and said, "Boys, you must never be vindictive." It was a lesson which I have, under the most trying conditions, tried to practice and have found it profitable.

I never saw him become excited, even in the most trying conditions. Once at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska, while searching for some papers regarding an offer from Andrew Carnegie to erect one of his libraries in Lincoln, a little Indian war drum, hanging on a nail in the library, dropped to the floor once, then again. Each time he picked it up and put it in place and said, "I often wonder why some things have to be."

His home life was a model and could be compared with that of an innocent child. Each morning at seven o'clock he would assemble the family in prayer and read a chapter from the

Bible. After prayer came breakfast and promptly at eight o'clock he would be at his desk working. The noon meal was served promptly at twelve, [and] by twelve-thirty [he was] again back at this desk. Supper [came] at six and [afterward he] again [went] back to his desk where he worked constantly until midnight. Both Mrs. Bryan and I would insist on him taking some exercise. Some days we would succeed in having him take a horseback ride for an hour. This practice would become [a regular] part of his life while at home, were it not for [interruptions by] the constant stream of visitors calling at all times.

In receiving those visitors, he never distinguished between the rich and the poor. I recall one day when a prairie schooner in front of the house at 1625 D Street, the clothing of the travellers as well as the wagon covered with mud. This made no difference with Mr. Bryan when he ushered them into the parlor where he entertained them for half an hour as he learned of their hardships and travels across the prairies. When some rich man came in his carriage, the meeting was very formal and ended in the same way. All of this went to show that Bryan loved the common people. It was for them that he fought and sacrificed his life. Unfortunately, many of them were deceived and misled. While honest at heart, they fell into the enemy's camp.

A third of a century [we were] side by side, in the home, in the Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry during the Spanish-American War, when I even slept in the same tent with him, [and] in all his campaigns when I took charge at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska. When [Bryan served as] Secretary of State, I made my home with him and assisted with Mrs. Bryan and himself at all the various functions as well as the many private affairs pertaining to government. When [Bryan fell] sick with facial erysipelas in February, 1919, he was confined to his bed at my home in Washington, D.C., and I attended his last birthday dinner at the Lafayette Hotel in Washington. He never visited the nation's Capitol, no matter how late or early the hour, without calling me up. A third of a century of such constant companionship certainly gave me a close insight into his private as well as his public life. We were of different faiths, he a Presbyterian and I Roman Catholic, but one's religious faith made no difference with him. He was the friend

of all who believed in God, regardless of the church at which they worshipped.

He was a friend and the word "friend" is a treasured word in every language. The sweet relationship which it describes is recognized throughout all history. Abraham is called the "friend of God" and it is said of the great Jewish lawgiver, Moses, that the Lord spake to him "face to face as a man speaketh unto a friend." Solomon understood the strength of the friendship tie—that it is sometimes stronger than the ties of blood—for he speaks of "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." He was also acquainted with the superb qualities of true friendship, for he says that "a friend loveth at all times."

Christ, too, hallowed the word and the relationship. He found the supreme test of love in man's willingness to lay down his life for a friend, and He called attention to the confidential character of friendship when he said to His Disciples "Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all

*Bryan home guards marching east along O Street, Lincoln, 1896.*



things that I have of My Father I have made known unto you."

Mr. Bryan's life and friendship measured up the highest requirements of the most exacting definition of the word "friend." Among the many, I have known of none more true and unwavering. We became friends on the day we met some thirty-four years ago, and the friendship continued without a moment's interruption until he was called to his reward.

Friendship with him was not like the tide that has its flow and ebb. It was not like the surface stream that is swollen by sudden showers and then recedes. It has rather the evenness of the mountain brook that finds its source in living springs.

Our friendship rested upon a very substantial foundation. We were in accord in both economic and moral questions and, in addition, we were personally congenial. We loved and trusted each other.

During his four years in Congress, Bryan roomed at my uncle's home (131 B Street, S.E.). It was then that the attachment grew up between us as well as the other members of the Bride family. We valued his constancy and companionship as well as the entire Bryan family who seem more dear to me than my own family for both Mr. and Mrs. Bryan seemed to me as a brother and sister and their kindly interest was really more than that of a father and mother. How I shall miss the earnest look in his steadfast eye, the cordial grasp of his hand, and the warmth of his honest heart.

He was a typical American. In the home, he was faithful to every tie; in the state, loyal to every civic duty; in politics, active and, in and out of office, incorruptible. It was he who gave to our government a guaranty of perpetuity [Bride's meaning is unclear here] and left his impress of honesty as a guiding star for future generations to follow. We can ill afford to lose such a one—especially at this time when so many great problems demand attention.

We can say of the deceased as the Master said of Lazarus, "Our friend sleepeth," but, alas, we cannot recall to its tenement of clay the imperial spirit that has been summoned to the world beyond. Our words cannot soothe his ear or bring back to his face the smile of welcome with which he was wont to greet his friends. But as one who prized his confidence and devotion, I can bear witness to his worth and to speak words of comfort and sympathy to the millions of true Americans who

sorrow with me in the great loss the Nation has sustained. I share with them the happiness which his life bestowed and I bear with them the sorrow which his death has brought into their homes. Peace [be] to his ashes, repose to his soul.

Mr. Bryan never grew angry at the bitterest criticism hurled at him by his political enemies. He always seemed to consider it as part of the game of politics in which he was engaged. That [was a] phase of his public life [in which he was] playing his part, and it seemed to go on during his entire public career. From close personal observation during all those years, I did not observe a single public official except Mr. Bryan who had legs long enough to reach the ground. There may have been longer legs than his, but if there were, they must have been crippled for want of back-bone strong enough to keep them straight. [This is a curious metaphor. Did Bride mean that Bryan succeeded better than any other politician in keeping his feet on the ground? Or did he intend to convey that Bryan stood taller than any other politician?]

The press of the nation tried to create public opinion against him, but failed, because theirs was a campaign of abuse rather than being based upon facts. Beyond doubt, they did create public prejudice. For instance, at the beginning of each administration, they lauded and magnified the President and in the meantime minimized the principles of his party. Then, when the Executive lost the favor of the newspaper owners and editors, they began a general criticism of his conduct. In other words, it is a continuous performance of defying [deifying?] first and then damning. This, however, was somewhat different in the case of Mr. Bryan, for he was always damned if he did and damned if he did not. Will those creatures some day take a parting laugh at their snobocracy and become real Americans?

The American people today do not depend so much upon our system of government, our statesmen, and their intelligence. It makes little difference how solemn the ceremonies may be under which treaties are negotiated, constitutions adopted, and laws enacted; unless the people themselves desire to keep them, they are mere scraps of paper.

## AFTERWORD

Dan Bride's deeply felt sense of loss at Bryan's death was fully reciprocated by the affection the Bryan family felt for him. Mary Baird Bryan, the Commoner's widow, directed her daughter Grace to send to Bride one of Bryan's two gold watches. Grace's account of the provenance of the watch is as follows, from a letter to Dan Bride:

Papa had two gold watches, the one given him by the State Department employees [when he resigned as secretary of state] and the other by his mother. It seems that grandpa Bryan wanted Papa to be educated at Oxford University in England. For that reason he purchased 30 steers and was fattening them for sale, the profit to go for Papa's first year at Oxford. When grandpa Bryan died suddenly, the steers had to be sold to pay a note (which grandpa had gone security on for a friend). All the money that was left grandmother used to purchase the gold watch for papa, which he carried from the time of purchase until the gift of the State Department watch. Mother is sending under separate cover this watch to you with the understanding that you will bequeath it to my [son] Bryan.

## NOTES

1. *Washington Post*, September 7, 1940, p. 8.
2. Although Bryan was elected in 1890, his term did not begin until November of 1891.
3. Actually most of Bryan's speaking engagements in 1895 were political in nature; he also contributed regularly to the *Omaha World-Herald* and held the largely honorific position of editor-in-chief with that paper. See Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, Vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964-1969), pp. 100-101, 104-112.
4. Bride's original reads 1918. His second memoir is more accurate.
5. In fact, Bryan stood virtually alone in the 1924 convention and had to endure repeated jeering from the New York City crowds, who packed the convention galleries. Coletta, *Bryan*, III, pp. 182-193.