

which the Jewish population numbered in the thousands rather than the hundreds. In “triple-digit towns” distant from prominent centers of Jewish-American life, Weissbach contends, Jews were fairly isolated and their organizational life was attenuated. Community life was built around kin connections, with most members pursuing mercantile enterprises and few laboring at the working-class jobs more common for Jews in large cities. According to Weissbach, small-town settings tended to discourage the most virulent forms of anti-Semitism and foster cooperation among Jews across liturgical lines. He concludes, “For tens of thousands of American Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the very fact of living in a smaller Jewish community in a small town surpassed other cultural and environmental factors, including regional location, as an influence on the contours of their lives.”

This sweeping and provocative conclusion should prompt considerable debate. Yet most scholars will agree that Weissbach has provided the definitive study of a topic important to modern American life. Those interested especially in the history of Iowa will glean gems from this book: stories of institutions, like the cemetery established by Iowa City’s German Jews, then sold as the community dwindled; tales of politics, including that of two brothers who served as aldermen in Muscatine; accounts of settlements seeking to sustain traditions, such as the appeal for a kosher butcher to settle in Davenport; and personal reflections on life at the turn of the twentieth century — one immigrant complaining of conditions in Cedar Rapids, another grateful for a new beginning in Dubuque. Such glimpses of individual lives and community experiences greatly enhance Weissbach’s comprehensive study of Jewish life in small-town America.

A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan, by Michael Kazin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. xxi, 374 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$30.00 cloth.

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According to Michael Kazin, William Jennings Bryan helped transform the Democratic Party “from a bulwark of laissez-faire into the citadel of liberalism we identify with Franklin D. Roosevelt” (xix). The author’s attempt “to gain a measure of respect for Bryan and his people” (xviii) succeeds remarkably well.

Bryan commenced his career as a lawyer, but his stint as a congressman from 1891 to 1895 propelled him to national prominence as

he styled himself a spokesperson for prairie insurgents. His capture of the Democratic nomination for president in 1896 marked the first of three unsuccessful bids for the presidency and inaugurated his reign as *de facto* conscience of the party. The Commoner's unrivaled oratorical abilities and his willingness to put them to exhaustive use during his campaigns earned him the admiration of even his opponents. In 1913 Bryan accepted a position as President Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state, but ultimately resigned over Wilson's alleged unfairness to Germany during the *Lusitania* crisis. Bryan's final public campaign was against the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in public schools, culminating in his famous appearance at the Scopes trial in 1925.

For Kazin, the key to understanding Bryan is to acknowledge "his adherence to a worldly faith shared by millions of citizens, one that resisted the compromises endemic to policy making" (xiv). That resistance to compromise helps explain Bryan's continued commitment to the free coinage of silver in 1900 even after it had lost salience as a political issue. It also helps explain why Bryan's decision to serve as secretary of state marked the beginning of his "political decline." Bryan, "no longer a free or independent agent" (219), henceforth served at the pleasure of the president.

Kazin's biography presents Bryan as the foreshadower of a progressive liberalism reliant on an activist federal government. Bryan's 1896 platform, which called for federal management of the national currency, a graduated income tax to redistribute wealth, and a guarantee of the right of workers to strike, "set the Democrats on a course that led away from their laissez-faire past and toward the liberalism of the New Freedom, the New Deal, and the Great Society" (55-56). The author could qualify this claim more than he does. Surely other influences were at work in creating the cartel-friendly policies of the early New Deal programs, which were hardly consistent with Bryan's anti-monopoly rhetoric.

But Kazin does not overstate his case too much, and he notes Bryan's many limitations. Bryan sometimes acted in seeming contradiction to his principles. For example, he opposed U.S. imperialism but supported the Spanish-American War and even formed his own volunteer regiment in the hopes of serving in Cuba. Bryan's support of the regulatory state was sometimes ambivalent. His 1908 platform "had one foot planted nostalgically in the Jeffersonian past" (155). The platform decried wasteful government spending even as it urged that the federal government assume an activist role. Most notably, Bryan never challenged his party's reliance on the disfranchisement of southern blacks.

The author's exhaustive analysis of admirers' letters to Bryan contributes to our understanding of midwestern history generally. The letters from the region demonstrate that Bryan's personal appeal extended far beyond the states he carried when running for president, that is, the states of the "Solid South," the central plains, and the Rocky Mountain West. Party ties evidently proved too strong to challenge Republican dominance in the region effectively. Kazin suggests as much when he notes that Bryan's advocacy of free trade may have cost him the support of wage earners who depended on jobs in midwestern industries that enjoyed Republican-sponsored tariff protection.

The strongest features of this biography are the fluency of its writing and Kazin's empathy toward his subject. The book reads well. It weaves discussions of historiography throughout the narrative, familiarizing nonspecialists with many of the key arguments about Bryan, Populism, and Progressivism. It also narrates vividly such potentially dull topics as the platform debates at the Democratic conventions.

"As a secular liberal," Kazin confesses to "a certain ambivalence about both Bryan and his many admirers" (xx). Nevertheless, he succeeds admirably at avoiding condescension. For instance, in his discussion of Bryan's campaign against the teaching of evolution, Kazin transcends the caricatures of Bryan as the example *par excellence* of religious bigotry and opposition to "progress." He points out that opposition to evolution was informed in part by revulsion at the use of pseudo-Darwinian theories to justify such invasive practices as compulsory sterilization. In Kazin's view, "Bryan was a great Christian liberal" (305), and political activists ignore at their peril his qualities of "sincerity, warmth, and passion for a better world" (306).

Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism, by Shelton Stromquist. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x, 289 pp. Notes, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

Reviewer John D. Buenker is professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. He is the author or editor of seven books and some three dozen articles and essays on the Progressive Era, including *The Encyclopedia of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*.

In this thoroughly documented and tightly argued volume, Shelton Stromquist expounds a provocative new synthesis of the Progressive Era, based on three interrelated propositions. First, while acknowledging the complexity, diversity, and internal contradictions of the era's