

criticized placing out as an "unscientific" and haphazard system of Christian charity. The NYCAS and similar organizations tried to defend placing out by improving placement and follow-up procedures, but they finally abandoned relocation during the 1920s, in favor of family rehabilitation programs for the urban poor.

Although Holt's book offers a fine institutional history of placing out, readers in Iowa and elsewhere with personal ties to agricultural communities, and those interested in social history, may find *The Orphan Trains* disappointing. Holt highlights the cultural values of individuals who created and operated relocation programs, paying rather superficial attention to the children and farmers who experienced placing out firsthand. Still, Iowa accepted many emigrants from the East, and Holt's book will undoubtedly encourage many Iowans to investigate the history of their communities.

American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898, by Robert C. McMath Jr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. vi, 245 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$10.95 paper.

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All kinds of historical readers will enjoy and greatly benefit from Robert McMath's *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898*. College students can learn the basic contours of the movement as well as get a good sense of why Populism remains so important to historians today. General readers will find a strong narrative about late nineteenth-century rural life as well as have the opportunity to ponder the long-term failures of third-party movements in America. Scholars will appreciate McMath's synthesis of a wide range of research as well as his complex perspective on the agrarian crusade. Without a doubt, *American Populism* will be a significant and influential book.

As the subtitle indicates, McMath's is avowedly a "social history." He treats Populism not just as the political insurgency that was its most visible manifestation. Instead, McMath emphasizes the deep roots of Populism in the changing rural life of, above all, the postbellum American South and Great Plains. For McMath, Populism consisted as much of an evangelical camp meeting where members of the Farmers' Alliance met to affirm their communal ties as it did of the 1892 Omaha People's Party convention that drafted one of the most significant radical platforms in American history. Yet McMath by no means slights politics. Indeed, one of the most welcome contributions

of the book is his insistence that politics is a fundamental part of social history.

McMath also takes chronology seriously. While many scholars still are attempting to discover the "essence" of Populism, McMath demonstrates just how complicated, uncertain, and contingent was the path that Populism took. McMath thus provides both a fine sense of the general economic and political culture of the post-Civil War countryside and a careful charting of the political twists and turns that led to the relatively rapid formation, zenith, and downfall of the People's Party.

American Populism contains a number of particular highlights. Among them, the most distinctive is McMath's connection of the Populist impulse with the producerism and radical republicanism that inspired the nineteenth-century labor movement as well as many middle-class radicals. Even more than that, the oft-neglected labor movement is a genuine actor in this drama of Populism's fate. McMath does not shy away from the less attractive aspects of these agrarian radicals, and he does a particularly good job of demonstrating their lack of commitment to racial equality. McMath's final judgments are similarly wise and meaningful. Despite his sympathy for Populism, he states that it never really had much of a chance of transforming the political course of modern America.

Overall, McMath does a good job of integrating local and state examples with his general story. Although students of Iowa history will not find in *American Populism* extensive treatment of the movement in the Hawkeye state, McMath does draw on Jeffrey Ostler's creative recent analysis to explain why Populism was so weak in Iowa (see Ostler's *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* [1993]). According to Ostler and McMath, Iowa's competitive two-party system was responsive to farmers' economic grievances in a way that the de facto one-party political structures of Kansas and Nebraska could not be.

Despite its overall high quality, *American Populism: A Social History* does contain several problems. Most importantly, the book may work better as a scholarly synthesis than as the undergraduate text that it is designed to be. McMath lacks the strong central argument that can make assigning controversial masterpieces such as Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* or Lawrence Goodwyn's *The Populist Moment* a delight. Neither does he evoke as powerfully and colorfully as he could the lively spirit of resistance that animated the "movement culture" that he so admires. These are minor criticisms, however, of a book that will long stand out as a sign of the maturity of historical studies of Populism.

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