

Book Reviews

A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan, by Robert W. Cherny. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985. xi, 225 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, index. \$15.95 cloth.

The latest volume in the Library of American Biography more than achieves the goals of its editor, Oscar Handlin. *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* is a succinct study in which the author combines a knowledge of the standard works in the field with original research and new insights and analysis. Robert W. Cherny, a professor of history at San Francisco State University, is no stranger to the scholarship of populism and progressivism. His earlier book, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915*, analyzed voting behavior, issues, and factions to illustrate how economic and ethnic factors interacted within geographic settings, and it effectively undergirds many of Cherny's statements regarding Bryan's role in Nebraska politics. The author's expertise is beyond question.

Venturing a brief biography of Bryan is no slight task. The historical literature of populism, progressivism, prohibition, woman suffrage, and World War I diplomacy is replete with controversy. Bryan was a major figure in American life from the 1890s to the 1920s who was seldom out of the limelight or off of the national stage. Biographies of him abound, and virtually every aspect of his career has been the subject of monographic work. Moreover, there is no consensus about either his character or his contributions to the nation's history. If writing about him within the narrow compass of a brief life story is not walking on scholarly quicksand it is certainly stepping on unstable ground. Cherny is obviously aware of all of this, for his note on sources indicates his assessment of the significant literature in the field and leaves little doubt as to where he stands and on whom he relies. Cherny also points out that, although his book is without footnotes, there are fully documented copies of it deposited in libraries for scholarly examination.

The focus in Cherny's biography is essentially Bryan's political career. No man lived more by the last election and for the next one, even when he was not a candidate. To Cherny, Bryan was a dedicated crusader and each chapter stresses this characterization. For the period

from 1900 to 1908, for example, when Bryan did not seek the presidency or raise a major issue, Cherny entitles his chapter "Between Crusades." This approach to Bryan provides a thoughtful framework for a man who defined all issues as moral causes. It allows Cherny to explain the evangelical nature of Bryan's upbringing and value system as well as to depict the contradictions and compromises that marked his career. It also affords Cherny opportunities to treat sympathetically Bryan's zealotry, when he undertook a cause; rigidity, when he adhered wrongheadedly to principles; and flexibility, when he compromised or remained silent. By moving from crusade to crusade Cherny successfully imposes a meaningful and chronological order as well as an intellectual discipline on what other biographers have treated as an almost chaotic life.

Cherny traces Bryan from his youth in middle-class small-town America—Salem, Illinois—through his legal education in Chicago and on to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he quested for political and financial success. He finds the basis of Bryan's thought and morality irrevocably rooted in the evangelical Protestant world of the nineteenth century. It is a theme to which Cherny returns time and again as he explains that Bryan was always a popular and highly paid speaker on the Chautauqua circuit, at first as a proponent of reform and later as a champion of temperance and peace or as an opponent of the theory of evolution. The book's chapters are the political crusades: "Populist Crusade" (1890-1895), "Crusade for Free Silver" (1896), "Crusade Against Imperialism" (1900), "Progressive Crusade" (1908), "Crusade For Peace" (1913-1914), and "Crusade against Evolution" (1919-1925). Each chapter analyzes not only an event or election but also explains the background of the incident and how Bryan assumed an important role in it. Cherny devotes the final chapter to an evaluation of Bryan. He discusses the ideas of Bryan's sharpest critics and often juxtaposes with them his own assessments, which are basically positive and compassionate.

Robert Cherny has not tried to write a heady book. But for a generation of students and the lay public whose knowledge of Bryan derives from the caricature depicted in movies about the Scopes trial or the often-distorted distillations that appear in textbooks, Cherny's study will provide a healthy corrective. Cherny's Bryan may not come alive for his reader because his is neither an intimate study nor a psychoanalytical treatment, and in a brief book there is little space for the nuances of character. But Cherny's Bryan will make sense to an open-minded reader who can learn why Bryan appeared to be such a bundle of contradictions so easily lampooned. Cherny demonstrates the logic of Bryan's life, not by stripping away the bizarre dimensions that have so

often attracted the attention of popularizers and critics, but by placing them in a proper context. Moreover, Cherny is fair and balanced. He shows Bryan at his best as an advocate of social change on behalf of the nation's laboring and dependent classes and at his worst as a pathetic anti-intellectual during the Scopes trial. Cherny's is not the last word on Bryan, but his book is a serious and intelligent one that students, scholars, and a general public can read with pleasure and profit.

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MARTIN RIDGE

The Anti-Monopoly Persuasion: Popular Resistance to the Rise of Big Business in the Midwest, by Steven L. Piott. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985. x, 1984 pp. Notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Readers who take this book's title and subtitle at face value will be disappointed. "Persuasion" means creed, but the book is not an intellectual history. The Midwest comprises at least twelve states, but Steven L. Piott deals mainly with Missouri; one chapter is about Chicago, and he gives some attention to Kansas. After an introductory chapter that summarizes American history in terms of the economic development that diminished people's control over their own lives and flouted traditional community values, Piott's next six chapters present what seems to be a randomly chosen assortment of topics. These include farmers' movements; a failed attempt by an "ice pool" to control prices in St. Louis in 1887; a beef trust in Kansas City and Chicago; the legislative history of antitrust measures in Missouri in 1889; the prices of hogs, wire, nails, plows, and other commodities; a streetcar strike in St. Louis in 1900; again the beef trust's operations in Missouri and citizens' responses; a teamsters' strike, supported by a citizens' boycott, in Chicago in 1902 (an obscure episode that lasted eleven days); Kansans' fight against Standard Oil; and a recounting of actions of Herbert Hadley, attorney general and then governor of Missouri, concerning Standard Oil. Chapter 7 discusses how big business's agreement to accept regulation "co-opted" the antimonopoly movement. The book closes with an "Epilogue," ending on page 156, in which Piott deplors the "co-optation" and its long-term consequences to the present day.

Perhaps we are meant to infer that these episodes and Missouri were typical, but scholarly studies have long shown great variation in thinking and behavior from state to state: among corn growers, wheat growers, and dairy farmers; between urban workers and those workers—miners and railroad hands—who lived in out-of-the-way places; among different ethnic and religious groups; between natives and immigrants; and so on. Piott ignores all such differences. "By the turn of

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