

# Books

## Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan by Louis W. Koenig

(Putnam's; 738 pp.; \$14.95)

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"Bryan lived too long," wrote H. L. Mencken in 1925 when *The Commoner* died, "and descended too deeply into the mud to be taken seriously hereafter by fully literate men, even of the kind who write schoolbooks."

There was a long wait. Then in the 1960's such men as Paul Glad and Lawrence Levine began to take very seriously indeed that same William Jennings Bryan whose very name had been sneered at for almost half a century. And at last, in 1971, comes Louis W. Koenig, who is even guilty of writing a schoolbook; it will be the definitive work on Bryan from here on in for any fully literate man or woman. Indeed, scholars will be borrowing from it, I suspect, without credit, for many decades.

But the publishers of Mr. Koenig's great work are curiously modest about it. "*Bryan*," it says clearly in the jacket copy, "is not a re-evaluation it is a monumental biography of a man whose towering importance has been wrongfully eroded by time."

But *Bryan* is most certainly a re-evaluation; indeed it may be the most courageous and useful revision of an important political figure produced in our time. (Possible competition: Ralph Korngold's revision of the established view of Thaddeus Stevens.) It is also unfair, although discreet, to blame Bryan's muddied name on harmless, neutral time. For the mud slung at Bryan beginning in his lifetime has been slung by men

and, despite a few scholarly mutterings of protest, has continued up to Koenig's work. (Even Koenig fails to indicate the scope of the slander of Bryan. He merely mentions it: "Few American politicians have been subjected to so much criticism and vilification.")

The *Commoner* had two sets of enemies: the Eastern rich during his lifetime and the Eastern intellectuals since. In 1896—one of those years that decided our future—the presidency was stolen from him, as Koenig points out, by gross election fraud and by such pressure on working people ("Don't come back to work if Bryan wins!") as was not applied even against Jefferson, Jackson, or That Man in the White House. After it was over the *New York Tribune* summed up Bryan's campaign:

"It gained such monstrous growth as it enjoyed from an assiduous culture of the basest passions of the least worthy members of the community. It has been defeated and destroyed because right is right and God is God. Its nominal head was worthy of the cause. Nominal, because the wretched, rattlepated boy, posing in vapid vanity and mouth-ing resounding rottenness, was not the real leader of that league of hell. He was only a puppet in the blood-imbed hands of Altgeld, the anarchist, and Debs, the revolutionist, and other desperados of that stripe. But he was a willing puppet, Bryan was, willing and eager. Not one of his masters was more apt than he at

lies and forgeries and blasphemies and all the nameless iniquities of that campaign against the Ten Commandments. He goes down with his cause and must abide with it in the history of infamy."

H. L. Mencken spoke for the intellectuals, and in more ways than one. For in the twenties Mencken was as obsessed by style as later intellectuals became in the sixties. His idol was Henry Cabot Lodge, who did not, Mencken admiringly alleged, sweat at all, but only changed his shirts out of fastidious habit, who presided over the 1920 Republican convention—the one that nominated Harding—with the true detachment of an aristocrat. And if there was one thing Mencken cared for more than another, it was your true aristocrat. "The hallmark and the justification of an aristocracy," he wrote, is that "it is beyond responsibility to the general masses of men, and hence superior both to their degraded longings and their no less degraded aversions."

Bryan, of course, dearly loved the masses of men and was as dearly loved in return. The wonder is not that he disgusted and baffled Mencken; the wonder is that no intellectual, so far, has found anything objectionable in Mencken's attitude toward Bryan and his working-class followers—nor, indeed, so far as I know, has a word of rebuke been written (even by Koenig) for the obituary Mencken wrote for *The Commoner* which, along with such outpourings as I have quoted from the *Tribune*, laid the basis for Bryan's posthumous reputation.

"There was something peculiarly fitting," wrote Mencken, "in the fact that his last days were spent in a one-horse Tennessee village, beating off the flies and gnats, and that death found him there. The man felt at home in such simple and Christian scenes. He liked people who sweated freely, and were not debauched by the refinements of the toilet . . . surrounded by gaping primates from the upland valleys of the Cumberland Range . . . he was obviously happy. . . . His nose showed no uneasiness when a hillman in faded overalls and

hickory shirt accosted him on the street, and besought him for light upon some mystery of Holy Writ."

Mencken, like Bryan, stood foursquare on some religious problems. Nobody respectable (I am not counting the lunatic fringe of hate-mongers) has ever vilified any religion in this country as Mencken vilified the Protestant Fundamentalists. Of their clergy he said in *The American Mercury*, November, 1924:

"Hordes of poor creatures have followed these appalling rogues and vagabonds of the cloth down their Gadarene hill; the result . . . is the conversion of Christianity into a machine for making civilized living impossible. It is wholly corrupt, rotten and abominable. It deserves no more respect than a pile of garbage."

The best account of the immortal monkey trial is, I think, in Lawrence Levine's *Defender of the Faith*, which deals with only the last decade of Bryan's life. Levine makes plain that the Tennessee law against teaching evolution had been a dead letter until the American Civil Liberties Union advertised for somebody to test it. When the twenty-four-year-old science teacher, John Thomas Scopes, finally agreed to act as guinea pig, he pointed out, to those who were urging him into the role, that every science teacher in the school was violating the law, with objections from nobody, since they all used Hunter's *Civic Biology*, the state-approved textbook, which taught from an evolutionary point of view. Darrow's remark, when he put Bryan on the stand—"I am examining you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes!"—about sums up the spirit of the performance in Dayton, in which Fundamentalism was ridiculed for the delectation of Eastern liberals. But in what should have been its important purpose—to test the constitutionality of the law and carry it, if necessary, to the Supreme Court—the Civil Liberties Union was far less eager and persistent. It appealed the law once, lost on a technicality, and dropped the case. And so the law remained on the books of Tennessee until 1967, when it was repealed.

Bryan was indeed guilty of a literal understanding of the Bible, though he was still not literal enough for many of his followers; his defense was that one miracle was as easy to believe as another. Whether his religion was inherently more or less absurd than the older faiths of Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Moslems and Hindus I leave to students of comparative religion. But certainly as Bryan lived and believed his faith—and he believed he could serve his God only by serving the humblest of His children—his religion was responsible for what Koenig calls his "creative" politics: "He cherished moral values and precepts," says Koenig, "to which men gave lip service in church, but which they and their institutions betrayed in the workaday world. Bryan toiled to alter what society would accept as good . . . and to substitute the higher moral standards he preached from his platform." The result was that he fought a long lifetime for such reforms as breaking the trusts, regulating banks and railroads, the popular election of senators, the graduated income tax, woman's suffrage and a series of peace agreements among nations which laid the basis for the United Nations. As a result he was the architect of the modern Democratic Party—"broadening the party's base," in Koenig's words, "to embrace the farmer, the city laborer, the immigrant, the small businessman, and to win the Negro." The New Deal, directed by a Roosevelt who always referred reverently to Bryan, was the final flowering of The Commoner's ideas (many of them borrowed from the Populists) on economic pump-priming and much else. Others of his ideas—from public ownership of railroads, telegraph, telephone, and the Merchant Marine to the publication of a regular government bulletin recording what is done, by whom, in Congress—are still lying around for some other high-minded politician to pick up.

There is, so far as I know, only one important error in Koenig's book. The Populists who supported Bryan in 1896—and whose banner has become so stylish that politicians as dif-

ferent as George McGovern and George Wallace now claim it—were not, as Koenig alleges, anti-Semitic. They were accused of anti-Semitism by some intellectuals during the fifties, when it was even hinted that Bryan's Cross of Gold speech, with its Christian imagery, was a kind of anti-Semitism. But scholars as patient as Mr. Koenig himself have investigated that canard; the Populists were found wholly innocent of any trace of anti-Semitism or nativism by Walter Nugent in *The Tolerant Populists* (1963) and by Norman Pollack in many articles and books.

Bryan was fond of quoting Wendell Phillips' remark: "How prudently most men sink into nameless graves, while now and then a few forget themselves into immortality." It would be folly to hope that Bryan, that sweating lowlife who so forgot himself in the common people, should ever achieve a respectable immortality. But to whatever extent his name is redeemed, Koenig will be largely responsible.

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