

# A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan

By Michael Kazin, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 306 pages, \$30

Reviewed by Ronald W. Meister

In the ranks of historical figures whose reputations were ruined by a play, William Jennings Bryan is at the very top, alongside Richard III and Antonio Salieri. *Inherit the Wind* forever impressed on the public mind the image of Bryan as a Bible-thumping boob of the boondocks, eternally squirming on the hooks of Clarence Darrow's cross-examination:

Q: *The first day – was it a twenty-four hour day?*

...

A: *I do not know.*

Q: *What do you think?*

A: *I do not think about things that I do not think about*

Q: *Do you ever think about things you DO think about?*

To be sure, Bryan had his eloquent detractors even before Paul Muni took him apart in 1955. The day after Bryan's death following the Scopes trial in 1925, H. L. Mencken scarcely took the time to bow his head before uncharitably calling him "a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without sense or dignity....leading his forlorn mob of imbeciles...[and] uttering stuff that a boy of eight would laugh at."

Comes now Michael Kazin, author of previous books on Populist and Progressive America, to rehabilitate Bryan, or at least rescue him from pejorative playwrights. With considerable success, Kazin recasts Bryan as the inspiration for major democratic reforms of the 20th century; not a yahoo but the Great Commoner whose faith inspired a movement for social liberalism, direct democracy and concern for the poor. Lost no more in the hoo-hah over his failed campaign for free silver is Bryan's early, and ultimately successful, advocacy for a progressive income tax, direct election of Senators, a federalized banking system, federal deposit insurance, stricter antitrust enforcement, women's suffrage and labor arbitration. Kazin portrays Bryan as nothing less than the principal founder of the modern Democrat party of Woodrow Wilson and FDR. While he is now remembered mostly as a thrice-defeated Presidential candidate, Bryan was described soon after his death by William McAdoo (himself no slouch at unsuccessful Presidential campaigning) as the man who, other than the occupants of the White House, "had more to do with the shaping of the public policies of the last forty years than any other American citizen."

There is much to be said for this view. Until Bryan stampeded the 1896 convention with his oratory, the Democratic party of Grover Cleveland with its power base in the Solid South was scarcely less conservative than its Republican counterpart on most issues except tariff reform. Bryan, as the social conscience of the party for thirty years, and its regular standard bearer, bears primary credit for turning Democrats into the more liberal party.

**A**nd oh, could the man speak, not only giving what is probably the greatest convention peroration of all time:

*You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns*

*You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold*

but declaiming earlier in the same speech:

*The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer; the attorney in a country town is as much a*

*business man as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis;....[the farmer] is as much a business man as the man who goes upon the board of trade and bets upon the price of grain; the miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth...and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured into the channels of trade are as much business men as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world.*

On the hustings, in Chautauqua tents, in Sunday sermons, Bryan could pour out oratory like his contemporary Puccini could write melody.

Having painted this picture of the Social Gospel personified, Kazin approaches the final crisis of Bryan's career almost reluctantly, as if unwilling to confront the lasting damage the Monkey Trial did to Bryan and his reputation. He is persuasive, however, in showing that Bryan battled as much against social Darwinism and theories of race purification as against science – all the while frankly acknowledging Bryan's persistent racism. Kazin points out that the very textbook from which John Scopes taught included chapters on eugenics and scientific human breeding, and reflected the thinking that led even a great jurist renowned for his liberal views to remark two years later that "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

By a close reading of the trial record, Kazin unearths some odd tidbits, including the fact that Bryan had been the commencement speaker at Scopes's high school graduation, and that much of the defense was conducted not by Darrow but by Arthur Garfield Hays, probably the only civil liberties lawyer named after three consecutive presidents. Kazin makes no mention of the common belief that the trial was a test case

instigated by the American Civil Liberties Union, claiming instead that Scopes, a math and physics teacher, had violated the statute inadvertently while substituting for the regular biology instructor, and that he and a group of civic leaders agreed to stage the trial to boost the local Tennessee economy.

**D**espite the recent revival of creationism and its handmaid, intelligent design, Kazin resists the temptation to draw direct comparisons to contemporary issues, though he does at one point refer to persistent concern over "The specter of a theocratic state run by idiots."

It is a shame that it does not suit Kazin's approach to include more of the trial transcript, which required little dramatic license to improve:

Darrow: *Where have you lived all your life?*

Bryan: *Not near you.*

Darrow: *Nor near anybody of learning?*

Darrow [inquiring about an agnostic Bryan claimed to have met]:

*What did he look like; how tall was he?*

Bryan: *I think he was about as tall as you, but not so crooked.*

The playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee took as their title the verse from Proverbs 11, "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind." Kazin might well have chosen an epigraph for Bryan from the very next chapter: "The speech of the upright saves them...A man gets his fill of good from the fruit of his mouth."

