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Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey.

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Carlos Schwantes tells us in Coxey’s Army that the 1894 “petition in boots” aroused
greater fears of social disorder than any event since the disputed election of 1876, although he also makes clear that such fears were largely groundless. The march on Washington to demand federal jobs for the unemployed was the brain child of Jacob Coxey, a prosperous Ohio quarry-owner, and Carl Browne, an itinerant panorama-painter who joined marches of the unemployed in Chicago in 1893. Coxey hoped not only to eliminate unemployment and create good roads but also to inflate the currency by paying workers in legal tender notes, an aspect only lightly developed by Schwantes in what is, overall, an excellent account of "Coxeyism."

When the original band of a few hundred completed their trek from Ohio to Washington, Coxey and Browne were arrested for violating a statute barring demonstrations or speeches on Capitol grounds. Schwantes demonstrates, however, that the idea of a march by the unemployed seized people's imaginations throughout the western states. Nearly every western city produced a band hoping to join Coxey in Washington. Like the original marchers, they drew their strongest support from local Populists and labor unions. Schwantes carefully traces the progress of the Coxeyite groups, counting some fifty train thefts along their routes.

Despite great difficulties in their journeys and despite the questionable constitutionality of the treatment accorded Coxey, the armies remained peaceful and patriotic, always marching behind the Stars and Stripes and even affixing it to stolen locomotives. For Schwantes, this "demonstrated the strength of the nation's values and traditions during a time of severe social and economic stress" (p. 260).

Schwantes notes the important influence of Coxeyism in demonstrating the national nature of the unemployment problem and in advocating federal responsibility for its solution. He speculates on connections between northwestern Coxeyites and the IWW; he might also have drawn more explicit parallels between Attorney General Richard Olney's reaction to Coxeyism and his actions against the Pullman strikers.

Coxey's Army has much to commend it. The narrative reads well, the conclusions are carefully stated, and both are based on extensive research in local newspapers along the marchers' routes. Unfortunately, there is no bibliography beyond the notes.

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