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Review of *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* by R. Hal Williams

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There is no universal agreement among historians regarding the number of presidential elections that should be defined as “critical” or “realigning.” Yet the election of 1896 is almost always included in this small group. R. Hal Williams makes the reasons clear in Realigning America, a compelling account of the “Battle of the Standards” between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. The book is exhaustively researched and written with a storyteller’s knack for moving the narrative forward and unearthing personal and colorful testimonies that buttress the history of the campaign.

Central to the book’s success is Williams’s ability to illustrate the importance of the gold vs. silver debate as extending beyond mere election strategy to exemplify the fundamental hopes and fears of a nation mired in depression and entangled in rapidly changing economic realities. Fervently believed, rejected, feared, and desired, “free silver” was a
simplistic yet compelling solution to a nation's ills that came to define the era's politics and passions. The chapters in *Realigning America* build toward the culmination of the "money issue" in the 1896 election and provide a detailed portrait of the era's characters and parties. Readers of *Great Plains Quarterly* desiring specific analysis of prairie populism or regional differences may find particularly interesting some of the election and convention results included in Williams's appendices, but the book is decidedly and successfully national in scope.

Williams describes one of the lasting legacies of the 1896 election to be a new style of campaigning that aimed to "educate" the voter rather than simply energize the faithful. While this legacy is clear and convincing, some will find other aspects of Williams's analysis less so. He finds fault with Bryan's polarizing rhetoric and "consciously defiant" language and admires McKinley's calm and reserved calls for national unity. McKinley, of course, could abhor "divisive class interests" and insist America was a nation without classes with the help of $3,500,000 in campaign funds. Conversely, Bryan had roughly $300,000 at his disposal throughout the entire campaign. Williams freely acknowledges the disparity, and additionally highlights some of the coercive practices of factories, banks, and other powerful institutions committed to defeating Bryan at all costs, yet seemingly fails to appreciate fully some of the wide-ranging implications of these actions. Bryan's faults as a candidate are exposed, clearly and fairly, and financial disparities and coercive practices indeed may not have determined the election's outcome; yet as we are asked to consider the many legacies of 1896, it is important to acknowledge that the consciously defiant language and polarized rhetoric of the agitator is often as much a reflection of historical context as candidate intent.

With this caveat of emphasis aside, *Realigning America* is an excellent contribution in the *University Press of Kansas's series on Presidential Elections*.

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