Fall 2011

Review of *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* by Verlaine Stoner McDonald

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It's not often that such names as Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky figure centrally in works dealing with Montana history. But that's the case with Verlaine Stoner McDonald's The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana. McDonald's history deals with a little-known but fascinating chapter in Montana, and western, history—
the 1920s electoral takeover of the local
government of Sheridan County, Montana,
by Communist Party members. As McDonald
shows, Sheridan County, an agrarian territory
of 10,000 persons in the extreme northeastern
corner of the state, proved fertile territory for a
variety of leftist political movements, including
Bryanite populism, the Non-Partisan League,
and, for a brief period, Communism.

In demonstrating how it was possible for
international Communism to gain a foothold in
“the heartland,” McDonald effectively evinces
both the severe challenges that faced the dry­
land farmers of Sheridan County in the first part
of the twentieth century and the political tradi­
tions that organizers such as Charles “Red Flag”
Taylor successfully exploited. A good portion
of McDonald's story is devoted to Taylor and
the local newspaper he ran for many years, the
Producers News. This is only fitting, since Taylor
and his newspaper, as McDonald shows, share
the bulk of the credit, or blame, for the political
accomplishments of the northeastern Montana
Reds. Drawing upon the agrarian ideology of
Thomas Jefferson and the class consciousness
of the Populists and labor organizations such as
the Western Federation of Miners, the Producers
News injected a frothy, feisty mix of political
agitation and local humor into the culture of
Sheridan County. This mix proved potent at
the polls. Taylor and his cohorts, first under the
banner of the Non-Partisan League and later
as avowed Communists, were elected to fill
the county’s state legislative seats and almost all of
its local government offices from 1923 through
1929.

Eventually, however, as McDonald skill­
fully illustrates, the northeastern Montana
Communists fell out of step with the local
populace. In part this was due to personal
indiscretions of some of the leading Party
members and in part to the increasingly doc­
trinaire nature of the local Communists and
of the Producers News, particularly following
the replacement of Taylor with Eric Burt at the
newspaper's helm. Events like the sensational
1928 “Bolshevik funeral” of fourteen-year-old
Janis Salisbury and organizations like the
Sheridan County Young Pioneers (Communist
alternatives to the Boy and Girl Scouts, who
sang, “One, two, three, young Communists are
we. Four, five, six, we're happy Bolsheviks”),
increasingly alienated the Communists from
the community. After 1928, they never again
were a political force in Sheridan County. In
1936, the Producers News folded up.

McDonald has produced a deeply researched
and valuable work. In addition to its skillful
tracing of the rise and fall of Communism in
northeastern Montana, The Red Corner also
contributes to the history of the American
Communist movement. While it would have
been helpful had the book done more to fit
the events in Sheridan County into a national
political and cultural framework, McDonald's
work is nonetheless worthwhile for anyone
with an interest in Montana or western
American history, the history of American
Communism, or of leftist agrarian politics.

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