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## Review of *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* By Michael Kazin

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*A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan.* By Michael Kazin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. xxi + 374 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

*A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* represents the first major biography of Bryan published in almost forty years. Michael Kazin's well-written and engaging book comple-

ments Edward Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the Scopes trial, *Summer for the Gods* (1997), in providing another useful corrective to the misguided yet common understanding of Bryan that emerged from popular histories of the Scopes trial. Kazin successfully illustrates why Bryan belongs in the "top rank of American leaders" of the reform era, arguing that only Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had a greater impact on politics and political culture in the early twentieth century.

The book's chapters follow Bryan's career in chronological order, a pendular narrative of nomination gained, election lost, and influence maintained. The enduring strength of his public support and the influence of his oratory are clear throughout, despite his losing a Senate race in Nebraska (before the popular election of senators, a reform Bryan helped usher in) and thrice losing the presidency. Kazin effectively places Bryan at the center of nearly every Democratic national convention—indeed most every political debate—from the time he was first elected to Congress in 1890 to his final Democratic convention in 1924. Indeed, Kazin's prose is strongest in capturing the drama of these conventions. From the "Cross of Gold" speech in 1896 to Bryan's surprise tactic in helping secure Wilson's nomination in 1912, Kazin illustrates Bryan's role as both spokesperson and strategist for an extensive array of democratic reforms.

Kazin is not alone, of course, in arguing that Bryan's rhetorical prowess was both his greatest strength and perhaps his greatest impediment to public office. But *A Godly Hero* captures how Bryan was anything but an empty orator, detailing the depth of support for the reforms he articulated and the authenticity of a movement that perhaps wasn't fully realized until FDR's New Deal. The importance of the Chautauqua circuit to Bryan's career, and how the original idea of an "institute" on a lake in western New York found even more salience on the traveling circuits throughout the Great Plains, may be of particular interest to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly*. Kazin also relies on the Nebraska-based newsletter, *The Commoner*,

for much of his insights into Bryan's career and highlights the importance of Bryan's younger brother, Charles Wayland Bryan, former mayor of Lincoln and governor of Nebraska, as an integral part of Bryan's public life and political career.

As with Kazin's earlier work, *The Populist Persuasion* (1995), those interested in American political history around the turn of the century will find great value in this thoughtful biography of The Great Commoner.

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