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Review of *Passion and Preferences: William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic National Convention*
By Richard Franklin Bensel

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this convention, held in the newly finished Coliseum in Chicago, was a watershed in American political history. Southern and western Democratic leaders, including those from the Great Plains, wrested the power of the party from “the patricians of the East”; the soft money men, or silver supporters, defeated the gold or hard money Democrats. Bryan did not alter this course, but his “Cross of Gold” speech, one of the most famous orations in American political history, did propel the young Nebraskan to the nomination. The convention also helped cause the decay of the People’s Party. Unlike modern conventions, which are somewhat contrived, the fervor “and commotion was spontaneous” inside the Coliseum. The convention also introduced the U.S. to Bryan, who became one of the country’s “most important political leaders.”

In regard to the 1896 convention, and particularly to Bryan’s speech, which supported the silver platform, *Passion and Preferences* reveals that preference is difficult to gauge, because it often changes, sometimes several times in a short time frame, especially when passion becomes a factor. Bensel writes that “displays of passion are most effective when they violate the formal proprieties of a proceeding,” and this is what Bryan did. The Nebraskan was not a viable presidential candidate prior to his speech. Bensel reasons that “the creation of preferences for Bryan as a presidential candidate was not and could not have been the product of a deliberate exchange between the delegates.” The author adroitly reveals that Bryan’s nomination after his “Cross of Gold” speech was based on passion, but was also calculated (or a preference) by Bryan himself. Yet it could only have happened in the “public sphere” of the convention hall, not in the backrooms.

Bensel successfully places Bryan’s speech and nomination in the wider context of the convention and its rules and rituals. His approach throughout is sharp, the story and analysis are compelling, and his argument is convincing. In the end, the Great Plains’ first serious presidential candidate was nominated; and out of the volatile 1896 Democratic

Passion and Preferences: William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic National Convention. By Richard Franklin Bensel. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xvii + 318pp. Tables, figures, notes, index. \$93.00 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

Richard Franklin Bensel offers a masterful inspection of William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech and the 1896 Democratic National Convention. As Bensel demonstrates,

National Convention, the East was compelled to recognize the political viability of the rest of the county.

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