

The Coming Campaign

by Clyde Wilson

American Populism: A Social History

by Robert C. McMath, Jr.

New York: Hill and Wang;

245 pp., \$19.95



“Populist” is a term so fraught with distortion and so apt to raise misleading connotations that we probably should find another word to use. It is worse in this respect than even “Whig” or “liberal.” Taken precisely, it refers to a political movement that swept some agricultural regions of the further Midwest and South in the late 19th century.

American historians have generally treated Populism in one of two ways: they have either confused it with the Progressivism that followed shortly on its heels, as a forerunner of the New Deal and modern liberalism; or, in a slightly more sophisticated and honest version, they have dismissed it as misguided rural bigotry irrelevant to the goals of enlightened urbanites.

The first interpretation is clearly wrong. It is true that there was some slight coincidence of political goals, in terms of federal legislation, arising from the Populists’ search for specific remedies. But Populists were basically rural Jeffersonians who mistrusted the remote and concentrated power of the Eastern elites who were the most obviously observable cause of their own distresses. Most of the Progressives, at least in the East, were self-consciously modern. They believed in the rule of elite urban experts (themselves) to solve all social ills by the application of science and systematization (regimentation). They were hired hands of the ruling class despised by the Populists, and still are. No Progressive that I know of was an enthusiast for free silver, and Progressives from east of the Mississippi almost all joined the homefront clamor for the War to End All Wars. Populists did not, and in fact provided the greatest core of patriotic opposition.

The first school of historians wanted to find honorary ancestors for the 20th-century political movements they favored and over-emphasized the element

of Populism that suggested a stronger central control of the economy. The latter school was a later generation of Ivy League liberals who wanted to distance themselves from the at-times messy and uncontrollable tendencies that were likely to develop if American yahoos from the boondocks were turned loose. Thus, they emphasized the bigoted and eccentric aspects of the Populists that were more likely to lead to Joe McCarthy than to George McGovern.

Most certainly the Populists were ethnocentric, and some of them were eccentric as well. But there is not the least evidence that the Populists were *any more* ethnocentric or eccentric than any other Americans of their time, including the conservatives and the Progressives. As American historians have tended over and over to do, these writers built their interpretations of our multivarious and magnificent past on small fragments of movements rather than the whole. (They have done this with the Revolution, Jacksonian democracy, Reconstruction, and much else.) That is, they always emphasize the bits of evidence that support whatever interpretation the Northeastern intelligentsia finds fashionable at any particular moment and ignore the substantial evidence that conflicts. Thus, Arthur Schlesinger uses a few Boston intellectuals to interpret Jacksonian democracy, and Populist historians have used a few crazy Kansans to characterize a much larger and different movement.

We now have for the first time a careful, accurate, full, and well-synthesized survey of Populism in the work of McMath, an economic historian. McMath understands the social and religious fabric, the mores, and the inheritance of political ideas out of which Populism arose. He understands the ecology and economy of the grain, cotton, tobacco, and mining regions where the movement flourished.

He gives a clear and succinct account of the origins of Populism, its impulses, its social fabric, its political history (nationally, regionally, and state-by-state), and its relation to other phenomena such as the cooperative, labor, and free-silver movements. More importantly, he understands the basic political inheritance, which was not socialist or Progressive but which rested on pious allegiance to Jeffersonian democracy and the defense of the liberties of the common decent people who labored in the

earth and produced real goods, as opposed to the slick operators who did not delve and span but grew rich on the government. (The bank and railroad corporations that the Populists attacked were, after all, not paragons of private enterprise but rather privileged collaborators of the political elite.) The author also understands that these instincts are as much or more “conservative” than “liberal,” although he clearly prefers the latter.

No, Populists were not the kind of people who wanted to confiscate your income, unless you were particularly rich and arrogant. They were not the kind of people who would make you wear your seat belt and forbid you to light up a stogie, for your own good, or send your children across town to achieve some abstract balance of school population and the Marines halfway round the world to save democracy in some place where they don’t know democracy from cornflakes. We ought to give the glory of fathering (or rather mothering) those great accomplishments to the Progressives. A Populist, on the other hand, is someone who thinks those bastards in Washington have too much power. He votes for George Wallace, Ross Perot, or Pat Buchanan, not for George McGovern, George Bush, or Bill Clinton.

Ponder this wonderful reactionary and timely passage from Ignatius Donnelly’s oration at a Populist National Convention:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. . . . The newspapers are subsidized or muzzled; public opinion silenced; business prostrated, our homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrated in the hands of capitalists . . . the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes, unprecedented in the history of the world, while their possessors despise the republic and endanger liberty. . . . We charge that the controlling influences dominating the old political parties have allowed the existing dreadful conditions to develop without serious effort to restrain

or prevent them. They have agreed together to ignore in the coming campaign every issue. . . . In this crisis of human affairs the intelligent working people and producers of the United States have come together in the name of justice, order and society, to defend liberty, prosperity and justice.

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The Russian Frontier

by Gregory McNamee

The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians

by W. Bruce Lincoln
New York: Random House;
500 pp., \$30.00



America, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner had it, is a land defined by its frontiers, once inexorably westward-lending, led by Manifest Destiny. The cultural geographer Carl Ortwin Sauer gave Turner's "frontier thesis" a twist that denizens of the New West will appreciate: "The westward movement in American history," he wrote, "gave rise to the real estate boom, made land the first commodity of the country and produced the salesman promoter. It was the latter rather than any public official who planned and directed the settlement of new lands."

Some readers may be surprised to learn that it was thus in Russia as well: that entrepreneurs and developers, individual and corporate, directed the growth of that nation to its eastern frontiers, finding in the endless taiga and forests of Siberia the material basis for a vast empire. W. Bruce Lincoln's *The Conquest of a Continent* addresses the rich history of the Russian frontier in the broad sweep of 500 pages. While he necessarily glosses over much that is of deeper interest, he gives us the best outline of Siberian history now available to readers in English.

Russia had long known the east, from whence came a wave of fearsome in-

vaders: Mongols and Tatars, the cavalries of Temujin and Tamur the Lame. They burned their way into European Russia memory from the very first; one of Russia's earliest histories is by the Chronicler of Voskresensk, whose pages recount a countryside where "nothing could be seen but smoking ruins and bare earth and heaps of corpses."

It took a Russian of like fury to send the Golden Horde packing, and the then-ruling Stroganov merchant class found their champion in one Ermak Timofeevich, a Cossack who had hitherto romped across Poland putting the torch to all that lay before him. Ermak was a crude man but a brilliant tactician, and in short order he defeated a mighty Tatar army on the banks of the Irtysh River, which secured most of Siberia for Russia as early as 1582. Ermak later drowned in that same river, pulled to its unfathomable bottom by the weight of his armor during another fight with the Tatars; his successors fought mainly guerrilla wars against native armies for another century, but Ermak's deeds made their work relatively simple.

Lincoln goes on to offer a lively *précis* of the history of Siberian exploration, recounting the crucial expeditions of Steller and Bering, of Fedorov and Krashennnikov, whose work extended Russia's eastward reach as far as Northern California. (Strangely, Lincoln overlooks the 19th-century mapping expeditions of Peter Kropotkin, the prince who became one of anarchism's great theoreticians.) That record of exploration is spottier than Lincoln—or a homegrown Russian chauvinist, for that matter—might like to admit. Kamchatka's coastline was mapped in the 1730's, but the interior contours of Siberia were not thoroughly charted until the last decade, and even then parts are not well known today.

The comparative study of frontiers is still nascent (we need a scholar to analyze, for example, the histories of both New Spain and Roman Iberia, looking for structural similarities), but Bruce Lincoln does not shy from drawing parallels between the Russian and American frontier experiences. While noting that Russia's eastward movement began a full century before America's westward forays, he looks carefully at the way the California and Alaska gold rushes mirror those of Tomsk (1828) and Yakutsk (1840), all propelled by men who, as a

Russian journalist put it, "were without the fear of God and without feelings of shame." That recklessness, Lincoln notes, allowed the buffalo hunters of the Great Plains and seal hunters of the Siberian seaboard alike to drive species to the brink of extinction within two generations' time.

Lincoln uncovers many little-known episodes in Siberian history. For one, he takes a fond look at the Russian-born intellectuals who founded a Siberian separatist movement to resist Nicholas II's plans to build a trans-Russian railroad; those intellectuals knew that once Siberia was bound to Moscow by an iron rail, an iron fist would quickly follow. (They were right, of course, as they learned when Siberia was absorbed into first the Russian and then the Soviet Empire and finally transformed into a vast penal colony.) Lincoln's study of censuses shows that from 1897 to 1911 more than three and a half million European Russians crossed the Urals into Siberia. He has mastered archival and oral-historical literature, and his book is rich with anecdotal notes—of, for instance, a Red Army machine-gunner's terror at facing battle-hardened White Guards for the first time in the impenetrable forests of Transbaikalya.

Similarly, Bruce Lincoln is attentive to the fine details that make history—and that make history come alive. He gives us an exact list of a Mongol cavalryman's effects ("a cuirass of thick leather . . . a fur or sheepskin coat, a fur hat with ear flaps, felt socks, heavy leather boots . . . dried meat, ten pounds of dried curds, a leather bottle filled with two liters of fermented mare's milk, at least two quivers, each with a side pocket with a file for sharpening arrows, an awl, and a needle and thread"); he quotes tellingly from a minor 19th-century exile's diary, noting his disgust at the village life of the native *lakuts* and at the lack of Russian companionship; he tells us that the shimmering fur of the Russian sable gave rise to the ancient story of the Golden Fleece, remarking that "this small animal that was scarcely larger than a house cat became the magnet that pulled the Russians across the entire Eurasian continent before 1650." In such details, the Talmudists said, God resides. In whatever event, they make for consistently engaging reading.

Siberia remains a land of great promise, pockmarked, to be sure, by radioactive waste dumps and forgotten