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Article Title: "For Zion's Sake, Will I Not Hold My Peace": John Williams, Radical Omaha Priest, 1877-1914

Full Citation: D G Paz, " 'For Zion's Sake, Will I Not Hold My Peace': John Williams, Radical Omaha Priest, 1877-1914," *Nebraska History* 63 (1982): 87-107

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1982Williams.pdf>

Date: 4/23/2014

Article Summary: John Williams, rector of St Barnabas Episcopal Church, fulfilled the traditional responsibilities of a parish priest. He also actively supported Omaha workers striking for increased wages and shorter hours.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Harper Clarkson, W Osgood Pearson, Arthur Llewellyn Williams, James Otis Huntington, Guy C Barton, E W Nash, James Bacon, John Welsh, John H Quinn, Henry May

Rectors of St Barnabas: George C Betts, James Pinckney Hammond, John Williams, Lloyd Burdwin Holsapple

Nebraska Place Names: Omaha

Keywords: St Barnabas Episcopal Church, "Ritual Controversy," high ceremonial [practices], *Parish Messenger* (St Barnabas newsletter), Populists, Industrial Workers of the World, strikes, prejudice, American Protective Association, Brotherhood of St Andrew, Central Labor Union, Knights of Labor, lockout, Omaha and Grant Smelting Works, Guy C Barton, James Bacon, social gospel, Anglo-Catholic

Photographs / Images: St Barnabas Church, 19th and California, Omaha, 1877; John Williams, 1877

“For Zion’s Sake
Will I Not Hold My Peace”:
John Williams,
Radical Omaha Priest, 1877-1914

BY D. G. PAZ

The Rev. John Williams retired from the parochial ministry in 1914, having served as rector of St. Barnabas’ Episcopal Church in Omaha for 37 years. The news of his retirement interested, of course, the local Anglican community, who numbered about 1 percent of the population of Nebraska.¹ But, surprisingly, Williams’ retirement was deemed newsworthy enough for the *Omaha Bee* to cover, and his death 10 years later was front-page news, complete with picture.² “I have watched him battle against wrong and oppression,” wrote Robert Cowell, an Omaha labor leader,

and it has been my privilege to labor with him in an effort to remove friction between labor and capital, so that the toiler might get justice. His leanings and sympathies are, I believe, constantly with the masses, and yet his fine sense of right would ever make him mete out justice to those who employ labor.³

Who was John Williams, and why should non-Anglicans have cared?⁴ Williams lived and worked in two realms. He was a priest who served his parish and was active in diocesan affairs, but he was also a resident of Omaha during that city’s most rapid period of growth. In order to understand him, one must look at both realms.

The 1860s, ’70s, and ’80s in the history of the Episcopal Church were dominated by what is called the “Ritual Controversy.” To oversimplify matters the controversy revolved around the question of whether the Episcopal Church was essentially Protestant or essentially Catholic in nature. The battle was fought in theological journals, in books, and in meetings of General Convention, the church’s supreme

legislative body. On the parochial level the war was fought by way of sights, sounds, and smells. That is, those Episcopalians who believed that their church was Catholic introduced into Sunday services a rich ceremonial, copied from contemporary Roman Catholic practice, that included elaborate vestments and music, burning candles, ringing bells, and incense. This high ceremonial appeared as nothing less than "popish superstition" to those who believed that the church was Protestant.⁵

This war reached Omaha in March of 1868, when the Rev. George C. Betts became rector of Trinity Cathedral. Betts was a Methodist minister who converted to Anglicanism, studied at Brownell Hall (now Brownell-Talbot School), and served as rector of St. Luke's parish, Plattsmouth. Almost immediately after arriving in Omaha, Betts opened a mission on Douglas between 10th and 11th Streets, where he used advanced ceremonial; the mission organized as St. Barnabas' parish and built a small frame structure on leased lots at 13th and Cass in February, 1869. Meanwhile, Trinity had become suspicious of Betts, and the vestry (a parish's governing board of laymen) finally asked him to resign in April. Betts did so, becoming rector of St. Barnabas'. The parish hauled its church building one block west to 14th and Cass in July and a year later hauled it farther west to the southeast corner of 19th and California, just north of the alley. Disaster struck; a violent storm on July 13, 1870, knocked down the building. The vestry met on the roof of the crushed structure and voted to rebuild. It bought the lot for \$3,300 and built a new church, with stone foundations, frame structure, furnace, glass, and carpet, for \$6,500.⁶

This moving and building was expensive and resulted in a heavy debt. Betts' ceremonial, moreover, had incurred the enmity of his ecclesiastical superior, Robert Harper Clarkson (bishop of Nebraska, 1865-1884), who forced him to drop the objectionable practices. Betts resigned the rectorship and moved to Kansas City in 1872. His successor, Fr. James Pinckney Hammond, was as Catholic and as unsuccessful in placating the bishop; he resigned in 1875. Meanwhile, the parish debt grew. The following year and a half was the parish's nadir. One service a Sunday—matins—was maintained by lay readers, parishioners dropped away, and the debt grew.⁷

At last the parish got a new priest. For a year the vestry had been begging the Rev. John Williams, rector of St. Luke's parish, Hastings, Minnesota, to come. Williams hesitated, but when he realized that St. Barnabas' parish was willing to accept advanced Anglo-Catholic ceremony and theology in contrast to his home parish, he made the move.⁸

I did dearly love the people I was about to leave, as I love them yet. But the unsought call of a people with whom I felt I could be theologically at one and the feeling that I could not move my way, the men, at all events, of the parish with which I had spent nine years, caused me to direct my footsteps hither.⁹

Williams became rector on June 24, 1877, and almost immediately turned the parish around. His presence as full-time priest drew back lapsed parishioners. He encouraged creditors such as George W. Meade and Ellen Barney to cancel some of the notes that they held. He turned the parish school from a money-loser into an operation that barely broke even, but ultimately had to give it up and sell the building to the Omaha Public Schools. The mortgage on the church building was paid off and the structure consecrated in 1883. Mortgages still remained on the schoolhouse and rectory and operating expenses were heavy, but the debt had been reduced to \$2,500.¹⁰

Concurrently, Williams advanced high ceremonial practices in his parish. Although he had, as the *Church Guardian* put it, "a monopoly of his peculiar views and foreign practices for the last dozen years in this diocese," he was not ashamed of his "strange vagaries." These consisted of teaching that the mass was a sacrifice that could be offered with special intention; that the rites of confirmation, matrimony, confession, unction, and ordination were sacraments; that the name, "Protestant Episcopal Church," should be changed by dropping the adjective "Protestant"; that private confession was to be commended; and that there was virtue in fasting.¹¹ Mass was at the center of St. Barnabas' parochial life. The Sunday service used a vested choir in procession, altar candles, and unleavened bread; prayers and responses were chanted on the great feasts, and possibly every Sunday; mass vestments were worn; and the parish may have had a paschal candle from 1883. In short, Williams was able to re-introduce high ceremonial at the parish within a year after his arrival in the diocese.¹²

How was Williams able to do what his predecessors at St.

Barnabas', George C. Betts, and J. Pinckney Hammond, could not? In the first place, it is said that Bishop Robert H. Clarkson appreciated a high ceremonial; he was a close friend of the Rev. H. G. Batterson, who had been driven out of St. Clement's parish, Philadelphia, over ceremonial.¹³ Certainly Williams testified that Clarkson "was utterly opposed to Catholic advance, not so much, perhaps, on his own account, as he told us more than once, but because the clergy and laity of the diocese were bitterly opposed."¹⁴ In the second place, both men were conciliatory. Clarkson sought harmony among his clergy, and Williams submitted to the bishop instead of standing on canonical rights, as had Betts. This acknowledgment of episcopal authority pleased Clarkson, who insisted on such obedience, and he gradually allowed St. Barnabas' to have its ceremonial.¹⁵

Williams was more than of local importance, because he turned his parish newsletter, the *Parish Messenger*, into a formidable weapon of ecclesiastical warfare. Williams started his newspaper because "the principles we held, and the school of thought to which we belonged, were misrepresented constantly in the diocese. The press was used against us, and so we resolved to use it a little for us."¹⁶ The pages of his newspaper teem with swinging attacks on the "liberal clap trap" of Phillips Brooks (bishop of Massachusetts, 1891-1893), the leading liberal theologian of the day, and the theological positions of the diocesan newspaper and of prominent Nebraska clerics. Williams also defended church claims to catholicity against threats from Masonic deism, Protestant interfaith missions, and loose discipline; he even opposed layreaders as tending to dilute clerical authority.¹⁷

The measure of Williams' influence may be taken by an incident at the 1887 diocesan council. The Rev. W. Osgood Pearson, rector of St. John's parish, Omaha, in the course of delivering the opening sermon, attacked "individualism," the "real presence" (the doctrine that the body and blood of Christ are objectively present in the bread and wine at mass), and all the works of the catholic movement as rank heresy. Williams, who rightly took the sermon as an oblique attack on him, challenged Pearson to present him for heresy and publicly taught the doctrines of the real presence, eucharistic sacrifice, and eucharistic adoration in the following issue of the *Parish*

Messenger. Although the *Church Guardian* tried to paper over the incident, claiming that it "would never have been heard of but for the sensation-hunting reporter," it is clear that the low-church faction in the diocese saw in John Williams a real threat.¹⁸

By the first decade of the 20th century, the influences of Father Williams and St. Barnabas' parish had spread throughout the diocese; many of the principles and practices for which he had fought in the 1870s and '80s were fairly common. Thus it was that in 1908, the Rt. Rev. Arthur Llewellyn Williams (bishop of Nebraska, 1899-1919) praised the parish's work "in behalf of Catholic Truth and Apostolic order."¹⁹ But Bishop Williams went beyond this in praising Father Williams: "It ought not, but it nevertheless does, take courage of a high order to stand unmovable with the minority in the espousal of unpopular principles, in religious, in political or in social affairs, no matter how just and righteous these principles may be."²⁰ It is this comment that explains why John Williams influenced all Omahans, not just Episcopalians, for he took positions as radical and as unpopular in social as in religious matters.

Omaha, during Williams' lifetime, enjoyed a remarkable boom. Its population had grown from 16,083 to 191,601 over the half-century between 1870 and 1920. Most of this growth occurred in the decade of the 1880s, when the population soared from 30,518 to 102,430, an increase of 336 percent. Much of this population growth was due to immigration; in 1880, for instance, one-third of the population was foreign-born, and in 1910, 54 percent were either foreign-born or of foreign parentage. Consequently, its population was ethnically diverse, including Germans, Czechs, Italians, Irish, Poles, and a few Negroes.²¹

These immigrants came to Omaha to work in that city's growing industries. Omaha had begun in 1854 as a transportation center for Missouri River steamboats and wagon trains west; in the 1890s, 10 railroad lines passed through the city and the Union Pacific had its headquarters there. The city processed the agricultural produce of the Great Plains with elevators, breweries that rivaled Milwaukee's and Cincinnati's, and the largest linseed oil mill on the continent. Gustavus Swift, Philip D. Armour, and Michael Cudahy had

made its suburb, South Omaha, the third largest meatpacking center on the continent by 1890. Omaha also boasted the largest metal-smelting works on the continent, which processed gold, silver, and lead ore from the Colorado mines.²²

Omaha's politics were as diverse as its population and economy. The Democratic and Republican parties maintained active organizations. Populists, of course, were strong, and Nebraska Populists tended to adhere to the more radical wing of their party. Lodges of freethinkers and socialists were to be found in the ethnic communities, and, toward the end of the period, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, known as "wobblies," began to appear. The radical fringe of Omaha politics remained vital until 1917, when the powers that be used the patriotic fervor of America's entry into World War I to suppress the socialist threat.²³

Population, economics, and politics all came together in the labor movement. Omaha workers organized in craft and industrial unions, the extent of which may be gauged by the activities of the Knights of Labor in the 1870s, the foundation of the Central Labor Union to coordinate job actions in the early 1880s, and the institution of an annual Labor Day parade in 1889. Throughout the period, moreover, Omaha had its share of strikes. Union Pacific and smelting workers went out in 1877 and again in 1880. They went out again in 1882, this time joined by workers from the Burlington & Missouri Railroad, Omaha & St. Paul Railroad, and Boyd's meatpacking plant. Telegraphers struck in 1883; the Knights of Labor struck the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1886; smelters and job printers struck in 1891; and in 1894 the meatpackers went out. During the first decade of the 20th century, tram drivers and construction workers struck their respective industries.²⁴ Omaha thus suffered the same kinds of social dislocation that troubled other industrial centers in the last quarter of the 19th century.

John Williams observed the vitality, turmoil, and pain of his midwestern city with the analytical mind of a theologian and the compassionate heart of a parish priest whose church, at 19th and California, was physically close to the center of strife.

Williams believed that the Episcopal Church, because it claimed to be "the Catholic church of this land," must not only build parishes, but also supply hospitals and orphanages to serve those in need. He deplored the fact that Clarkson Hospital was the only Anglican corporate charity in Omaha, and charged that the more prosperous Episcopalians spent their funds on entertainment and elegant homes, not on charity.²⁵ "A swell church, a swell organ, a swell choir, and an eloquent preacher, to 'draw,' and fill the church's treasury, to pay his own salary and the interest on the church debt, that is the ideal hope, if not the actual state of the Christianity of our time."²⁶ Hence, he argued that the clergy must cease being the servants and apologists for the rich and clearly take the side of labor, to demand fair play and a decent life, and to call the rich to give justice. If the church continued to be the tool of the rich, then it could expect the working class to be captured by the "anti-christians," "ultra-Socialists," "Anarchists."²⁷

We preach very much, today, against anarchy, and of the rights of property. Anarchy is wrong, and the rights of property are sacred. But anarchy is the creature of despotism, legal or social, and the rights of property would be safe, if they who have it acquired it justly, and used it righteously and generously. But what have priests to do with doing police duty for property, which is the acquired inheritance of cruel, selfish, personal or social injustice, that reckes not what becomes of the bodies or souls of those from whom it was wrung by craft or force, or by whom it was created, without receiving the due reward of their toil.

We may, we should preach patience to those who are the victims of superior craft, or power, if we stand among them and of them, but what right have priests, or other ministers, to stand behind or before property's entrenched camp, to shout to the people whom they have neglected or forsaken, about anarchy and the rights of property? Property has rights if justly and honestly acquired, and righteously used, but as compared with human life, with justice, with fair play, it is but as the dust in the balance. Human life first, the right, the full right to earn, and to have food, and raiment, and shelter; that right comes first.²⁸

Given his dislike of industrial alienation, he opposed all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, or ethnic. He wanted the third collect for Good Friday ("have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics; and take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word"²⁹) revised to avoid linking Jews with Turks and infidels. With regard to Negroes he attacked the "hateful spirit of race and

caste" that led the dioceses of South Carolina and Virginia to pass Jim Crow canons denying blacks representation in diocesan conventions. He argued that Catholics, because of their conception of the church as the body of Christ, an organic whole, would put away the color line in church affairs, while Protestants, because of their imperfect conception of the church would not. On the other hand, he opposed integrated parishes where there were enough blacks to justify the organization of a separate black parish.³⁰ He objected to "the distinction made [at General Convention] between men and women, who were equally engaged in the Lord's work." He condemned abortion, calling it "ante-natal infanticide," "this horrible, heathenish crime," "this deadly sin."³¹

His most vigorous opposition, however, was reserved for the two strongest prejudices in Omaha in the Gilded Age: those against Indians and Roman Catholic immigrants. Reflecting on the Massacre at Wounded Knee, Williams attacked white America for hypocrisy:

The Czar of Russia issues a ukase banishing the Jews from certain provinces in Russia, and forthwith our sympathies are aroused. We hold great meetings in our eastern cities to protest against the cruel wrong.

But this nation itself has its hands blood-red with the cruel, monstrous, shameful slaughter of an entire race, which it has robbed, plundered, lied to, betrayed, murdered, and no effectual protest is heard to put to route [sic] and confusion, to condemn to everlasting infamy the instrument of our national shame, the Indian Bureau at Washington, and its confederate ring of plunder-loving political vultures scattered over the land, wherever there is a chance to batten on the starved bodies of Indians, men, women, and children.³²

Williams' second major dislike was the American Protective Association, a nativist organization particularly strong in Omaha in the 1890s. The level of nativism, both unorganized and in the form of the APA, grew between 1892 and 1896 because of hard times. C. P. Miller, a member of the APA, was elected mayor of South Omaha in 1892, and APA-endorsed candidates were elected to civic offices in both Omaha and South Omaha in 1892, 1893, 1894, and 1895. In 1895 the APA gained control of the board that oversaw the Omaha Police Department. In 1896, however, the electoral tide turned as traditional Democratic and Republican loyalties reasserted themselves. Although "a large segment" of the Omaha Protes-

tant clergy supported the APA, "a sizeable segment" opposed it, especially after the 1896 decline.³³

Father Williams, however, attacked the APA as early as January of 1892. Although he had often crossed pens with the Roman Catholic diocesan newspaper, defending the Episcopal Church's claims to catholicity, he defended the Roman Catholic Church against misrepresentations in the local Omaha APA monthly, the *American*. He warned working men away from the APA, called its leaders in Omaha, J. C. Thompson and the Rev. J. G. White "a precious lot of slanderers" and "stupid," and likened its newspaper to "the bray of the ass in the stable."³⁴

There is a legitimate field of debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants, upon which men of Christian learning and character may fairly contend for truth as they understand it. Religious controversy is not of itself an evil, for by it and out of it religious truth is ultimately evolved, and religious error condemned. But men who abandon this fair field of controversy to indulge in every vile suspicion and infamous slander, confess that so far as they are concerned, they have no cause, and no claim to the usual courtesies of fair debate.³⁵

In its turn, the APA called Williams "a Jesuit in the garb of a Protestant Minister." Williams admitted that if faced with the choice between the APA and the Jesuits, he would take the latter, for the APA was un-Christian, un-American, vicious, prurient, and ignorant.³⁶

So we see that John Williams hated those aspects of Gilded-Age in Omaha that led to alienation and social fragmentation. It was difficult, however, for him to identify the best solution to these ills, the best political way of translating Christian brotherhood from pious hope to social reality. He remained unconvinced by Henry George's "single tax" philosophy, although he defended that doctrine against charges of "communism." He was not sure that free silver was the answer, for it did not seem to him to make economic sense, and he feared that the whole currency question boiled down to a selfish struggle between debtor inflationists and creditor deflationists.³⁷

Nevertheless, he believed that he had to work to better Omaha society, in deeds as well as in words, so he ended up treating matters on a case-by-case basis and eschewed

ideological purity for the promise of practical improvement. On the personal level he joined the Knights of Labor and sought out their assemblies both in Omaha and elsewhere.³⁸

On the parochial level he believed that St. Barnabas' must reach out toward the working class. To that end he organized a chapter of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, an organization of laymen that attempts to give practical expression to one's Baptismal and Confirmation vows through rules of prayer and labor, and encouraged it to attend to the social implications of Christianity. Under his guidance, the chapter made regular visits to the county poor farm. He brought the monk Father James Otis Huntington, whom Henry May calls "the most fiery of the early Episcopalian radicals," to give a 10-day mission in March of 1890. Williams arranged for Huntington to deliver public addresses on the rights of wage-earners at Boyd's Opera House, introduced him to the Central Labor Union, and obtained permission for him to speak to the workers at the Union Pacific Omaha yards every day.³⁹

Williams' activism reached to the Omaha city level. The Populists nominated him for a place on the Omaha School Board in 1892, but he withdrew. "We were not a Populist in political conviction, . . . and we did not care to be even the candidate of a forlorn hope, with the apparent obligation of being bound by caucus obligations in school board matters."⁴⁰ He accepted the Democratic nomination the next year on condition that he would be free from party discipline, but he was defeated at the polls. He generally supported striking workers, asking in 1894 why the UP could afford to pay its receivers \$18,000 per annum, but could not afford to pay its workers the old scale of wages.⁴¹ He addressed a mass meeting of the Carpenters' Union at Washington Hall in July, 1892, called to protest the Carnegie Company's brutal suppression of the Homestead Strike. He urged "unselfish devotion to the cause and perseverance in working for its success."⁴² But written and even spoken words were not enough for Father Williams; he became directly involved in strikes.

The Nebraska Legislature early in 1891 had enacted a law requiring an eight-hour day for all workers save farm laborers and domestic servants. Shortly before August 1, when the law was to take effect, the lines of battle began to be drawn. On the afternoon of July 20, E. W. Nash, secretary of the Omaha

and Grant Smelting Works, announced that his firm intended to violate the law. "The thing," he said, "is all buncombe anyway, and is manifestly unconstitutional. We shall commence paying our men by the hour after August 1, and if the men we have don't want to work ten hours per day, we can easily get plenty who will be glad to do so."⁴³ The workers replied that night at a mass meeting called by the Central Labor Union in the Grand Opera House, where labor leaders urged the men to stand firm in demanding eight hours.⁴⁴

There were two problems that were to bring two-and-a-half weeks of turmoil to Omaha. Employers did not want to see the hours of daily labor reduced from the standard 10 or 12, because they thought that their profits would disappear. Workers, on the other hand, wanted an eight-hour day, but they did not want to see their daily wage, low as it was, further reduced.

The strike began on the morning of Saturday, August 1, in the job printing trade. Printers were paid between \$16 and \$18 a week for 59 hours. Their Typographical Union, Local 190, proposed an eight-hour day and six-day working week with a salary of \$16, but the employers refused and ordered their unionized workers out of the shops. Some of the smaller job printers did comply with the law, but the 11 largest firms—Republican; Rees, Klopp Bartlett & Co.; Reed, Swartz & McKelvey; Pokrok Zapadu; Western; Berkley; Ackerman Bros. & Heintze; and Festners—refused. Festners at first complied, but within a few days joined the lockout. In order to break the union, the employers cooperated in "ratting" the town; that is, they imported non-union workers—"rats," or scabs in modern parlance, from Kansas City, St. Louis, and elsewhere.⁴⁵

The workers, of course, fought back. At a series of meetings during the next fortnight, union leaders urged the men to stand firm. Although two big shops, Ackerman Bros. and Festners, did settle, the results of the dispute were inconclusive, and by Labor Day that year, some shops remained unionized, while others used scab labor.⁴⁶

Other trades were also disturbed. The grading, sewer, paving, and curbing contractors agreed with their men to retain the ten-hour day, as did the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. Other workers, however, pushed for the

eight-hour day: horseshoers, bricklayers, hod carriers, carpenters, plumbers, and iron workers at the Paxton & Vierling foundry.⁴⁷ The most serious strike, however, was at the metal-smelting works.

The Omaha and Grant Smelting Works operated around the clock in two 12-hour shifts. Many of its workers, of course, spent their time loading ore cars and never came near a furnace. Those who did work in the intense heat of the furnace rooms received between \$2.25 and \$1.75 a day, with two days off (with pay) a month. These workers wanted an eight-hour day without a reduction in wages. The company, however, wanted to pay by the hour, which would have meant that furnace men would have had their maximum daily wage cut from \$2.25 to \$1.50. The men struck on Sunday, August 2. There followed a war of nerves. Workers picketed the smelting works, and attended mass meetings at local halls and under the wagon bridge at the lower end of Douglas Street to hear union leaders speak. At one such meeting, for instance, John H. Quinn, a local radical labor leader and socialist, reminded the strikers of the Haymarket Massacre.

Never mind the police, no matter how many special hirelings they put on to intimidate or shoot you down. Do your duty, stand for your rights. You remember a meeting in Chicago a few years ago that the police undertook to break up. Well, it went pretty hard with the police who tried it and I am sorry to say it went hard with some other poor fellows a few months later. They were hanged, but, boys, remember that they died for us.⁴⁸

For their part, E. W. Nash and his superior, Guy C. Barton, president of the company, asked the Omaha police to protect their property and threatened to move the smelting works away. Meanwhile, rumors of riots, arson, and fights filled the press.⁴⁹

From the beginning of the strike, however, certain elements in Omaha urged arbitration. The Rev. J. H. H. Reedy⁵⁰ addressed strike rallies on August 3-4, calling for an amicable settlement, but he soon disappeared from the scene. Richard Scannell, Roman Catholic bishop of Omaha, published an open letter on August 6 that urged cooperation and compromise in the strike and suggested that "three distinguished men" be chosen as arbitrators. The next day, Dr. George L. Miller, prominent local Democratic politician, and a few companions, called on Barton, who promised to make concessions

if the strikers did likewise. Barton, however, had no intention of compromising, as the next step in the affair demonstrates. On Friday evening, August 7, the Omaha City Council appointed an arbitration committee consisting of Councilmen James Donnelly Sr. (2nd Ward), Henry Osthoff (5th Ward), Christian Specht (6th Ward), and Theodore Olsen (8th Ward).⁵¹ The committee met with Barton and Nash on the morning of Monday, August 20, only to be told that there was nothing to arbitrate. The next day W. B. Musson and other officers of the Central Labor Union issued a further call for arbitration, but it appeared that neither side to the dispute was willing to compromise.⁵²

The tide of events turned, however, on the afternoon of August 13, when a nine-man delegation of workers, accompanied by Father John Williams, met with Barton and Nash. Negotiations almost broke down because Barton objected to the presence of James Bacon, a strike leader. Bacon and six others left, while Williams, John Welsh, and M. Boatman remained. Barton and the two workers agreed to the following interim compromise: only those men working near the furnaces would get an eight-hour day, and all the strikers could go back to work save Bacon, whom Barton hated. Williams and the committee took this report back to the main body of strikers, waiting under the Douglas Street bridge, where it was agreed to meet Saturday evening to discuss the proposal.⁵³ The compromise was acceptable to most of the strikers, although the question of pay had not been settled, so Barton opened the smelter's doors and began taking in men on the following Monday. "We have concluded," he added, "to take back Bacon with the rest. This is because of the earnest pleading of Rev. John Williams, which alone has enduced [*sic*] us to grant this."⁵⁴

But early in the morning of August 17, as the smelter opened, handbills headed "Barton's Treachery" appeared, calling for a mass meeting at 4:30 p.m. under the bridge. The "treachery" was this: Barton had reopened the works before a settlement on pay had been reached, and not all the men stood to have their hours of labor reduced. At the meeting Bacon and the other members of the strike committee clustered together to decide what to do. "One of the conspicuous figures in the center of this group was Father Williams, the

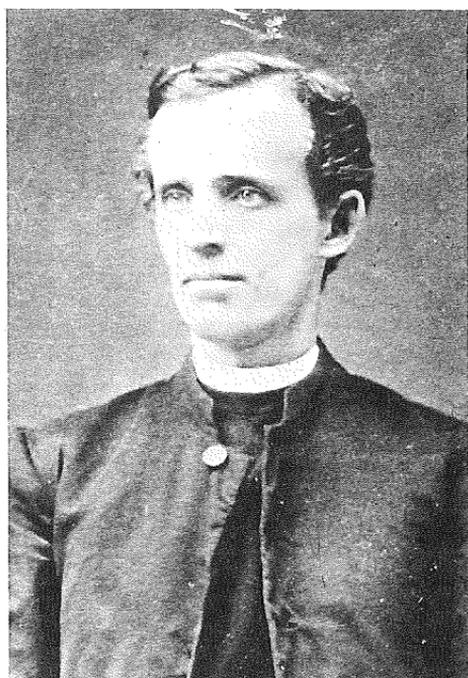
Episcopalian minister, whose mild blue eyes and kindly face beamed gently on the men in whose interest he was working." Williams shuttled to and fro between the men under the bridge and Barton in his office, as a final settlement was hammered out. Workers at the furnace—furnace men, roasters, tappers, and potpullers—were to have an eight-hour day, but at a reduced salary; side-shop men and roustabouts, who labored elsewhere in the plant, were to work as before. Although the settlement drew opposition from those excluded from the eight-hour day, the strikers agreed to accept it. Barton and Nash promised to implement the settlement on September 1.⁵⁵

The settlement, although a compromise, was weighted in favor of the workers, since Barton and Nash had conceded the principle of the eight-hour day. Unfortunately, however, the settlement proved to be no settlement at all. Barton announced on August 29 that the furnace men would vote on whether to work twelve hours for twelve hours' pay or eight hours for eight hours' pay. The vote on August 31 produced a 68 percent majority (126-58) for a longer day and no cut in pay. Meanwhile, James Bacon and John Welsh had stopped going to work and were discharged after the fifth day of absence. Barton ended the affair on September 1 by presenting \$500 to the Omaha Police Benevolent Fund in thanks for the policing of the strike—and perhaps as insurance for the future.⁵⁶

Guy C. Barton could not break the strike, as had happened in 1882,⁵⁷ but he was successful in breaking the settlement. First, the smelting workers, in contrast to the typographers, did not have the backing of a solid organization. Although leadership in the persons of James Bacon and John Welsh rose from their ranks, and local labor leaders such as John H. Quinn and George Washington Brewster lent their moral and rhetorical support, there was no disciplined organization or strike fund. Second, the men themselves were divided, as the mass rallies suggest. Speeches, resolutions, and explanations had to be made in English, German, and Czech, and there was a certain amount of tension among the linguistic groups. The Czechs and Germans had less to gain—in the short run—from a successful strike and were more interested in returning to work. Third, Barton's own strategy of agreeing to



St. Barnabas Church, 19th and California, Omaha, in 1877.



John Williams, 1877.

a compromise settlement, getting the men back to work, and then reopening the question after the men had had a fortnight to reaccustom themselves to old work patterns were shrewd. Whether the strategy was thought out in advance or was improvisatory cannot now be determined.

Williams' role may be explained by fitting him into the context of the social gospel. Henry May had identified three types of social gospel: conservative social Christianity, which sought to solve problems through charity; progressive social Christianity, which was dissatisfied with existing conditions but not prepared to advocate sweeping change; and Christian socialism, which did advocate sweeping change.⁵⁸ In contrast to men such as Charles Stelzle, the Presbyterian activist, and Henry Martin Hart, dean of the Anglican cathedral in Denver, who spent most of their energies in traditional charitable work, Williams attacked social evils bluntly and went into the streets when necessary.⁵⁹ But in contrast to men like Father Huntington and W. D. P. Bliss, who wanted to reorder the economic structure, Williams' prophetic vision of social ills left him when he came to work in the world, and he ended up engaging in acts of amelioration rather than in attacking the root of the problem.⁶⁰

Although Williams continued to be interested in the labor movement and helped to settle a strike in the job printing trade in 1903, he grew more conservative as he aged.⁶¹ He regretted the loss of the pre-industrial paternalistic virtues, symbolized by the master-apprentice relationship, which created bonds of unity and protection. Instead, in late 19th-century industrial America, the cash nexus was the only relationship between employers and employees. This alienated, impersonal society, he thought, came about from three causes: the fragmented state of Christianity, which prevents employers and employees from worshipping together; sectarian, racial, and ethnic prejudices, which keep people apart; and the rise of great corporations, which intensify the impersonality of business. Christian brotherhood, he believed, can transcend these barriers to unite people in love.⁶² "Christianity was sent into the world by its Divine founder not to destroy human society by a violent revolution of its hard social conditions, but by the law of Christian love and brotherhood to slowly leaven and mould it."⁶³ Christianity thus works to

change the social system gradually, over time, by changing minds, not by revolution.⁶⁴

Why did Williams become an activist? His essays in the *Parish Messenger* and elsewhere shed no light on this problem. As a religious paper issued "in the interest of the parish and the church," it focused on ecclesiastical disputes and discussed political questions only as space allowed.⁶⁵ Nor does his theological training suggest an answer. At Seabury Divinity School, Faribault, Minnesota, where he received a bachelor of divinity degree in 1869, he pursued an ordinary course, studying church history through the Reformation, Biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and pastoral theology; the only unusual regimen was that all students had to engage in manual labor, probably some kind of farming, for two hours a day.⁶⁶ It is unlikely that this requirement provided any crucial sensitizing to the needs of urban industrial labor. Arthur Schlesinger and Henry May have suggested that the social gospel should be seen as an ecclesiastical response to the challenge of the fundamental social change caused by the Industrial Revolution.⁶⁷ It is likely, in my judgement, that Williams' experiences and observations in Omaha after 1877 were the motivating factors. Of course, his Anglo-Catholic theological position was also important, because it stressed the equality of all believers and suggested that the interests of the state, as an earthly, secular power, were different than, and possibly opposed to, the interests of the Church.⁶⁸

How was it that Williams was able to maintain his position in his parish despite his social activism? Clyde C. Griffen wanted to see what laymen thought of their social-gospel clergy, and examined eleven Episcopal, one Unitarian, and three Baptist churches in New York City. He identified three reasons for the lack of lay opposition to the social gospel clergy: personal styles that rich laymen found endearing; family connections with distinguished clergymen; and recognized success in building a parish, which Griffen calls the most important advantage.⁶⁹ St. Barnabas' had no rich laymen, save Barton Millard, the politician; its most active laymen—J. W. Van Nostrand, Joseph R. Daly, C. W. Lyman, George F. Labaugh, and T. L. Ringwalt for example—were middle-class businessmen. Nor did Williams, an Irish immigrant who had started out life as a skilled worker, have connections with any

great American clerical families. But Williams did build a parish, and since his was the only Anglo-Catholic parish between Chicago and Denver, laymen who wanted that kind of ceremony and theology had nowhere else to go. The only recorded instance of dissatisfaction with Williams, in 1882, apparently had more to do with financial difficulties than with anything else, and the parish rejected his offer of resignation by a vote of 71 to 3.⁷⁰

John Williams' retirement from the parochial ministry in 1914 marked the end of an era for his parish, his church, and his city. His successor, the Rev. Lloyd Burdwin Holsapple, was more concerned with further ceremonial advance than with social issues. (Holsapple ultimately became a Roman Catholic.) More important, as the city of Omaha spread west, the parish communicants also moved, and the church building was isolated from any residential areas. The conjunction of a new rector and the devastating tornado of Easter Day, 1913, which "cleared" a number of lots at the western edge of town, led the vestry to conclude that "the logical time" for a move had arrived. It purchased a lot on the southeast corner of 40th and Davenport and erected the church building that St. Barnabas' parish currently uses.⁷¹

There remain Father Williams' legacies. One person, of course, cannot bear the entire responsibility for changes in attitudes or actions, but he did help make the Episcopal Church in Omaha more receptive to high ceremonial and social responsibility. We, today, might think that he was too fair to powerful industrialists and that he should have been more thoroughgoing in his war against social evils, but there can be no doubt that he was radical indeed for his time and his place.

NOTES

1. *Crozier*, XV:6 (June, 1914), 101; D. G. Paz, "A Study in Adaptability: The Episcopal Church in Omaha, 1856-1919," *Nebraska History*, LXII (1981), 112.
2. *Omaha World-Herald*, August 16, 1924; *Omaha Monitor*, August 22, 1924.
3. *Omaha Sunday Bee*, March 22, 1914.
4. Williams left no personal correspondence, and so information on his life must be pieced together from other sources. Chief among them are the *Parish Messenger*, which he edited from 1886 to 1896 (microfilms at the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library and the Nebraska State Historical Society), the monthly newspapers of the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska and the archives of St. Barnabas' parish (both on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society). I take this opportunity to thank Fr. Frank Williams (John Williams' grandson), Fr. Rod Moore, formerly rector of St. Barnabas' parish, and the Rt. Rev. James Warner, bishop of Nebraska, for making the original sources available to me and helping my research in other ways.
5. George E. DeMille, *The Catholic Movement in the American Episcopal Church*, Church Historical Society Publications, No. 12, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1950); E. Clowes Chorley, *Men and Movements in the American Episcopal Church* (New York, 1946).
6. Canonical parish register, 1869-1883, Archives of St. Barnabas' Parish, Omaha (hereafter cited as SBA), II/1, 6-7; James M. Robbins Jr., "A History of the Episcopal Church in Omaha from 1856 to 1964" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1965), 25, 32-33.
7. *Ibid.*, 35-37, 39-40; vestry minutes, November 15, 1876, June 18, 1877, SBA, I/1, 89, 93.
8. Vestry minutes, June 24, 1876, *ibid.*, 86.
9. *Crozier*, III:7 (July, 1902), 62.
10. *Church Guardian*, I:4 (July, 1877), 71; *ibid.*, II:3 (June, 1878), 42; *ibid.*, VI:9 (June, 1883), 147; Robbins, "Church in Omaha," 45-49, 51-52.
11. *Church Guardian*, IX (Jan. 1886), 54-55, (March, 1886), 91; *ibid.*, X (March, 1887), 75, (April, 1887), 90; *Parish Messenger*, I:5 (St. Bartholomew 1887); *ibid.*, 9 (Septuagesima, 1888); *Journal of Proceedings of the Twenty-fifth Annual Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Nebraska...1892*, 93 (this source shall be cited hereafter by number of council, year, and page); *36th Council* (1903), 22-27; John Williams, "The General Convention and Legislation," *Crozier*, XI:9 (September, 1910), 153-155.
12. Vestry minutes, June 5, 1879, March 29, 1880, SBA, I/1, 123, 127; *Church Guardian*, I (January, 1878), 151; *ibid.*, II (January 1879), 104, (April, 1879), 155; *ibid.*, IV (January, 1881), 60; *ibid.*, VI (April, 1883), 106; *ibid.*, VIII (February, 1885), 75, (April, 1885), 106; *ibid.*, X (January, 1887), 43; *Parish Messenger*, I:5 (St. Bartholomew 1887); *ibid.*, II:7 (St. Matthias 1889).
13. *Church Guardian*, IV (October, 1880), 1; Robbins, "Church in Omaha," 58-59; *Crozier*, V (July, 1904), 216; *13th Council* (1880), 15.
14. *Parish Messenger*, VII:9 (June, 1894).
15. *Church Guardian*, II (January 1874), 5; *ibid.*, III (June, 1880), 151; *Crozier*, III:9 (September, 1902).
16. *Parish Messenger*, II:1 (St. John Baptist 1888).
17. Almost every number of the newspaper contains articles on these issues, and specific citations would drown the reader.
18. *Church Guardian*, I (June, 1877), 116-118, 120; *Parish Messenger*, I:3 (St. Barnabas' 1887); *Omaha Daily World*, May 19, 1887; *Omaha Republican*, May 20, 21, 1887.
19. *Crozier*, IX:6 (June, 1908), 90.

20. *Ibid.*, XV:10 (October 1914), 168.
21. *A Compendium of the Ninth Census, 1870*, 253; *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, I, 421, 452; Edgar Z. Palmer, "The Correctness of the 1890 Census of Population for Nebraska Cities," *NH*, XXXII (1951), 259-267; *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, III, 48; *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, III, 604; Kathleen Louise Fimple, "Midwestern Mosaic: A Study of the Homogeneity of Ethnic Populations in Omaha, Nebraska, 1880" (unpublished MS thesis, South Dakota State University, 1978), 16, 23-30. Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, *Broken Hoops and Plains People* (Lincoln, Nebraska 1976), provides a summary of the main ethnic groups in Nebraska.
22. Walker D. Wyman, "Omaha: Frontier Depot and Prodigy of Council Bluffs," *Nebraska History*, XVII (1936), 143-155; Wallace Brown, "George L. Miller and the Boosting of Omaha," *Nebraska History*, L (1969), 277-291; Howard P. Chudacoff, "Where Rolls the Dark Missouri Down," *Nebraska History*, LII (1971), 1-30; Howard P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans: Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha, 1880-1920* (New York, 1972); Fimple, "Midwestern Mosaic," 9; Cary DeCordova Wintz, "Social Response to Ethnic Groups in Omaha, Nebraska: 1892-1910" (unpublished MA thesis, Kansas State University, Manhattan, 1968), 5-6.
23. David G. Wagaman, "The Industrial Workers of the World in Nebraska, 1914-1920," *Nebraska History*, LVI (1975), 296-297, 323; Bruce Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in Frederick E. Luebke (ed.), *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1980), 147-169; Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962); Industrial Workers of the World Collection, box 99, folder 11, box 128, folder 4, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit.
24. James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York and Chicago, 1894), 376-378; Roland M. Gephart, "Politicians, Soldiers, and Strikes: The Reorganization of the Nebraska Militia and the Omaha Strike of 1882," *Nebraska History*, XLVI (1965), 94-95, 104-106, 108; Chudacoff, "Dark Missouri," 13, 20.
25. *Parish Messenger*, II:10 (St. Boniface 1889); John Williams, "How Can the Revenues of the Church be Best Sustained?" *Church Guardian*, II:6 (December, 1878), 94.
26. *Parish Messenger*, IV:1 (October, 1890).
27. *Ibid.*, III:12 (September 1890); *ibid.*, IV:2 (November, 1890).
28. *Ibid.*, IX:5 (September, 1896).
29. *Book of Common Prayer, 1892*, 119.
30. John Williams, "The General Convention," *Crozier*, XI:11 (November, 1910), 183; *Parish Messenger*, I:3 (St. Barnabas' 1887); *ibid.*, II:1 (St. John Baptist 1888); *ibid.*, 2 (Transfiguration 1888).
31. Williams, "General Convention," 182; *Parish Messenger*, II:6 (St. Paul's 1899).
32. *Ibid.*, IV:4 (January, 1890 [sic, 1891]).
33. Wintz, "Ethnic Groups in Omaha," 11-54.
34. *Parish Messenger*, V:4 (January, 1892); *ibid.*, VI:7 (April, 1893).
35. *Ibid.*, 9 (June, 1893).
36. *Ibid.*, 6 (Passiontide, 1893).
37. *Ibid.*, III:7/8 (April, 1890); *ibid.*, IX:3 (June, 1896).
38. *Ibid.*, IV:2 (November, 1890).
39. Vestry minutes, December 2, 1886, SBA, I/2, 217; *Parish Messenger*, III:3 (November, 1889); *ibid.*, 7/8 (April, 1890); *ibid.*, IV:2 (Nov. 1890); D. G. Paz, "Monasticism and Social Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century America: The Case of Father Huntington," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, XLVIII (1977), 56-63; *27th Council* (1894), 113; *33rd Council* (1900), 72.

40. *Parish Messenger*, VII:1 (November, 1893).
41. *Ibid.*, VII:4 (February, 1894).
42. *Omaha Daily Bee*, evening ed. (hereafter cited as *Bee*), 28, July 29, 1892.
43. *Ibid.*, July 20, 1891.
44. *Ibid.*, July 21, 1891.
45. *Ibid.*, July 31, August 1, 3, 5, 8, 1891.
46. *Ibid.*, August 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, September 7, 1891.
47. *Ibid.*, August 1, 5, 1891.
48. *Ibid.*, August 3, 1891.
49. The strike received daily coverage in the *Bee* for two-and-a-half weeks.
50. I have not been able to identify Reedy, whom the *Bee* called "the presiding genius of St. Timothy's mission."
51. Councilmen T. J. Lowry (1st Ward), Richard Burdish (3rd Ward), William F. Bechel (4th Ward), E. T. Morearty (7th Ward), and F. L. Blumer (9th Ward) were also appointed, but refused to serve.
52. *Bee*, August 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 1891.
53. *Ibid.*, August 14, 1891.
54. *Ibid.*, August 17, 1891.
55. *Ibid.*, August 18, 1891.
56. *Ibid.*, August 29, 31, September 1, 1891.
57. Gephart, "Politicians, Soldiers, and Strikes," 108-115.
58. Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York, 1949), 163, 170, 235.
59. George H. Nash, III, "Charles Stelzle: Apostle to Labor," *Labor History*, XI (1970), 151-174; George N. Rainsford, "Dean Henry Martin Hart and Public Issues," *Colorado Magazine*, XLVIII (1971), 204-220.
60. Paz, "Monasticism and Social Reform," 51-54, 63-66; Christopher Webler, "W. D. P. Bliss, Priest and Socialist," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, XXVIII (1958), 9-39; Richard B. Dressner, "William Dwight Porter Bliss' Christian Socialism," *Church History*, XLVII (1978), 73-82.
61. *Crozier*, IV:3 (March, 1903), 39.
62. John Williams, "Masters and Servants," *ibid.*, II:2 (February, 1901), 10-11.
63. *Ibid.*, 9.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Vestry minutes, February 4, 1886, SBA, I/2, 211; *Parish Messenger*, IX:2 (June, 1896).
66. *Catalogue of the Divinity Department of the Bishop Seabury Mission* (Faribault, Minnesota, 1866-7), 7, 9; F. A. McElwain, P. V. Norwood, and F. C. Grant, "Seabury-Western Theological Seminary: A History," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, V (1936), 293, 296.
67. Robert T. Handy, "The Protestant Quest for a Christian America, 1830-1930," *Church History*, XXII (1953), 8-20, gives a useful summary and critique of this hypothesis.
68. It does seem to be the case that Anglo-Catholics produced more social Christians, proportional to their numerical strength, than did their Evangelical or Broad Church brethren; in the 20th century, the American Church Union, the main organ of the Anglo-Catholic movement, strongly supported the civil rights movement until the black power and anti-war movements of the late 1960s, when the Rev. Canon Albert J. DuBois, its leading editorialist, turned conservative.
69. Clyde C. Griffen, "Rich Laymen and Early Social Christianity," *Church History*, XXXVI (1967), 45-46, 58-61.
70. Williams to the vestry, November 17, 1882, vestry minute-book, SBA, I/1, 157-159; minutes of an extraordinary parish meeting, November 1882, *ibid.*, 160-162.
71. *41st Council* (1908), 86; *46th Council* (1913), 38-41; *Crozier*, XV:10 (October, 1914), 162; vestry minutes, December 8, 1914, January 4, 1915, SBA, I/4.