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Article Title: Introduction

Full Citation: Robert W Cherny, "Introduction," *Nebraska History* 77 (1996): 118

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1996Bryan_Intro.pdf

Date: 4/19/2013

William Jennings Bryan and His America

William Jennings Bryan, a thirty-six-year-old resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, leapt into the nation's headlines in July 1896 when the Democratic National Convention passed over a number of better-known and more senior Democrats to name the "Boy Orator of the Platte" as its candidate for president. He had electrified the convention shortly before with his dramatic "Cross of Gold" speech, causing many delegates to abandon their earlier commitments and to hand the nomination to Bryan. Even today, when political pundits gather to analyze a presidential nominating convention, Bryan's speech is often cited as the leading example of an orator's ability to sway a convention. In 1953 a poll of professors of American history and government ranked the speech among the fifty most significant documents in American history.

The centennial of Bryan's famous speech and his first campaign for the presidency provides an occasion for a special issue of *Nebraska History* devoted entirely to Bryan and his America. William Allen White, the nationally prominent editor of the *Emporia (Kansas) Gazette*, once claimed that William Jennings Bryan had "influenced the thinking of the American people more than any other man of his generation"—even though White also admitted he had never voted for Bryan. Some articles in this issue explore some of the ways that Bryan influenced the American people, while others look at important influences on Bryan.

We begin with Nebraska delegate Edgar Howard's eyewitness account of the "Cross of Gold" speech, an account that captures the mesmerizing effect of Bryan's oratory and the passions it unleashed. Those passions are further revealed by what is surely the most unusual narrative of any presidential campaign in American history: Vachel Lindsay's long poem on Bryan's 1896 campaign, written in 1919. Bryan's influence on Lindsay was great. Lindsay's poem is from the perspective of an ardent Bryan partisan, one whose commitment had not wavered even though nearly a quarter-century had passed. The following essay, by Rebecca Edwards, presents a very

different view of the 1896 campaign, one based on a careful reading of the images that appeared in the newspapers of the day.

The next group of articles surveys various aspects of Bryan's long career as politician, journalist, and public speaker. Kenneth Wenzel draws upon Russian-language sources not used by previous Bryan scholars to analyze the influence on Bryan of Count Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist and mystic. Julie Greene then looks at Bryan and organized labor, especially during Bryan's third campaign for the presidency in 1908. She finds in Bryan a key figure for the long-term relationship between unions and the Democratic Party. The next essay in this section, by John E. Carter, also focuses on the 1908 campaign, but from a very different perspective: a look at what happened when a presidential election campaign occurred in the midst of the nation's first infatuation with the picture postcard.

The last three essays present evaluations of Bryan's place in American history. Kendrick Clements, author of studies of Bryan's diplomacy and of the presidential administration of Woodrow Wilson, gives us an assessment of Bryan and American foreign policy. Stephen Jay Gould, who did a great deal to undo Bryan's crusade against the teaching of evolution, presents a surprisingly sympathetic evaluation of Bryan's contributions to American life in an essay originally published in *Natural History* in 1987. My essay, in conclusion, examines the changing ways that historians have depicted Bryan, and suggests that this may some time tell us as much about the historians as about Bryan.

Together, these essays give us a more complete understanding of Bryan and his America. Along the way, they may give us a more complete understanding of America in our own time.

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