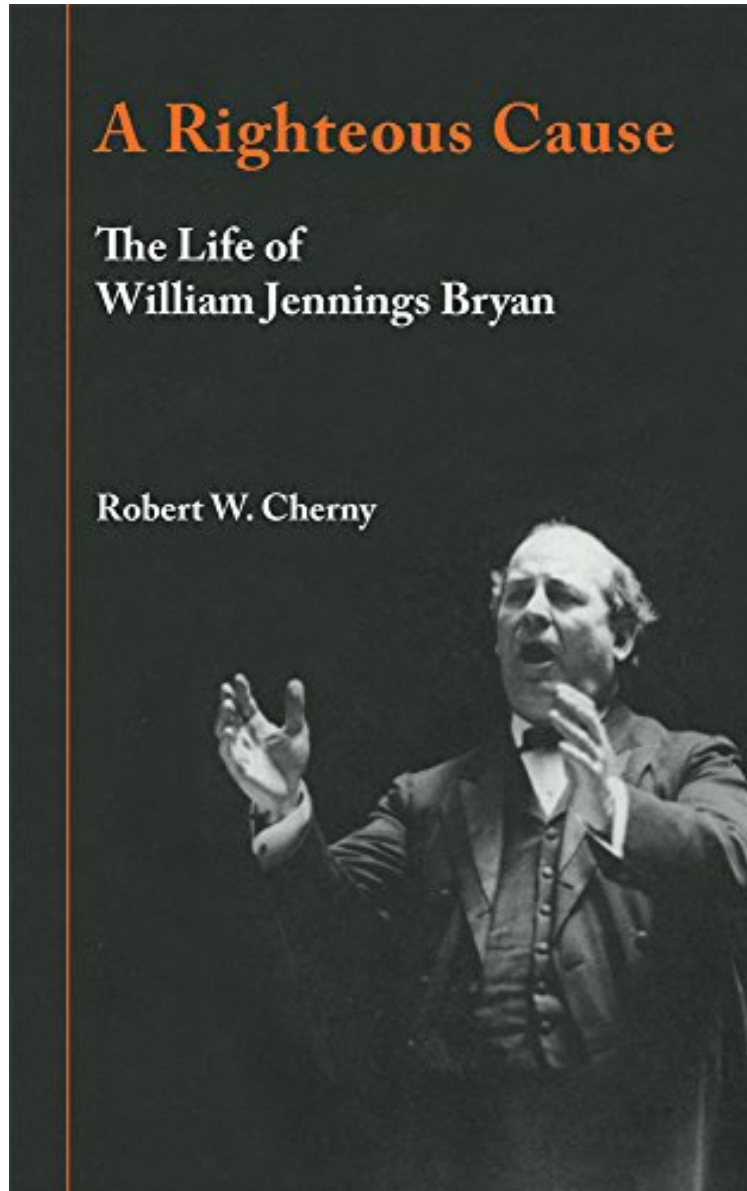


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# A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan

*Robert W. Cherny*

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**Robert W. Cherny : A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. SolidBy Wayne A.I agree with the gentleman from Missouri that no writer yet has fully evoked Bryan. This particular book covers his life well but without digging heavily into

psychology and I'm fine with that. The film "Inherit the Wind" made far too much of the fictionalized Bryan's endless talking and eating in some ham-headed attempt to conjure up an oral fixation or something. In the late Fifties to mid-Sixties every socially conscious filmmaker was a psychologist. Today, the same can be said about biographers. The problem with Bryan, at least in terms of making him into something sensational, was that he was a paragon of virtues from an earlier time, a time when when, well, humility, modesty, temperance, focus, honesty, forgiveness, and a lot of other now-unfamiliar and boring concepts were considered virtues. Oh, Bryan was ambitious, and he enjoyed being adored by crowds but it wasn't the ambition of Cheney or the craving for adoration of Clinton, at least not in any dreary sense we'd understand. Bryan made his impact by being Bryan, by speaking to people, by articulating their dreams, by often being an effective politician. He did that so well that up till fairly recently he still had mythic status, a great orator who was still spoken of with some reverence as late as the 1960's (I doubt nowadays 1 in 10,000 would even know the name). I think ultimately historians have the same problem with Bryan as music biographers have with Franz Joseph Haydn--one of the greatest of all composers but a fairly normal and healthy man whose life lacked wild stories and titillating anecdotes. Personally, I find biographies of people like Haydn and Bryan enjoyable (this book at hand was very refreshing and I've found over the years that virtually everything from the University of Oklahoma Press usually is). It's nice reading about accomplished folks who are fairly normal. It's interesting that Bryan and Roosevelt, two of the giants of that era, both had steady and rewarding marriages with highly intelligent and accomplished women, both had families, both had lives and interests outside of politics. There's a rough definition of "healthy" lurking in there somewhere.

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. A Short and Concise review of Bryan's Life By David Southworth This brief, concise review of the life of William Jennings Bryan is a quick and easy way to familiarize yourself with this important American politician. While Bryan's only official political positions was as a two-term congressman and secretary of state for a little over two years, he was one of the most influential politicians for the thirty years he was active in Democratic politics. The three-time losing presidential candidate popularized (thought did not originate) many of the progressive issues of the period, championing many causes that eventually became law. Examples of this include the direct election of senators, the right to vote for women, and regulation of business and industry. Through his powerful belief in Christian virtue, Bryan constantly championed the rights of the least among him. While his strict fundamentalist views eventually humiliated him at the end of his life by way of the "Scopes Monkey Trial," it was this belief in the decency of human life that drove him for so long. This book gives a brief and succinct discussion of the great politician's life.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. THE BOY ORATOR OF THE PLATTE By Alfred Johnson William Jennings Bryan is a rather interesting and paradoxical figure in American political history. In this man one can observe an apparently sincere political fighter who supported many progressive issues vital to the rural and urban working classes of the day, a vanishing type of politician, then as now. Although he was the Democratic Party candidate for President in 1896 I do not believe that party would be his home today, nor would his progressive politics resonant with the substance of Democratic politics today. It is odd that over a century later Bryan's politics would far to the left of what passes for the Democratic center today. At the same time we see the limits that even a sincerely religious man can bring to political discourse. His Christian fundamentalism never let him really fight to the end for the program of agrarian relief and industrial reform that he articulated so well. Mr. Cherny's mainly admiring biography does much to reintroduce the events surrounding this important figure who today, if remembered at all, is mainly known for being on the wrong side of evolution question in the Scopes trial. That is part of his late history and although that controversy has heated up again today Bryan is still on the wrong side of the evolution question. However, that issue does not define what he represented in American history. Rather, one must look at the populist, agrarian forces in revolt and the program Bryan tried to implement in his bid for power. Bryan political career represented the last dying gasp of the agrarian revolt that flared up in the America Midwest and West in the last third of the 19th century. That such a revolt, left to its own devices, was doomed in the face of the rise of industrial production; the increased mechanization of agriculture and the dominance of finance capital do not make that revolt any less poignant. The question faced by Bryan and any other potential leader was the manner in which the revolt would be harnessed to win power and what allies would be sought to fight against the ravages of capitalist expansion. Mr. Bryan took an essentially parliamentary, traditional road by trying to use the Democratic Party as a vehicle for social change. Many later politicians have also broken their teeth trying that same strategy for progressive social change. In 1896, and perhaps earlier, such a road was futile. In short, Mr. Bryan could have led an independent third party revolt, based on the already existing People's Party (which in his early career Bryan had been closely allied with) linked with the industrial working classes of the Northeast and Midwest. This strategy was left to other forces that later formed of the Socialist party in 1901. Mr. Bryan's political trajectory, however, was not to join that fight but basically moved to the right culminating in support for the suppression of radicals in World War I. We have that seen that political phenomena before, as well. That said, this is an important book that details one type of parliamentary strategy still followed today by many progressives about the way to bring social change. That today it has produced meager returns does not lessen the interest it for this writer as applied in an earlier time. At that time it at least made some rational political sense.

Three times the Democratic Party's nominee for president (1896, 1900, and 1908) and secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan voiced the concerns of many Americans left out of the post-Civil War economic growth. In *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, Robert W. Cherny presents Bryan's key role in the Democratic Party's transformation from the conservatism of Grover Cleveland to the progressivism of Woodrow Wilson. Cherny draws on Bryan's writings and correspondence to trace his major political crusades for a new currency policy, prohibition, and women's suffrage, and against colonialism, monopolies, America's entry into World War I, and the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

.com William Jennings Bryan is one of the most influential "failures" of American politics: a three-time Democratic nominee for president who, although he never won the office, transformed his party into an institution "pledged," in biographer Robert W. Cherny's words, "to use the power of government on behalf of those displaced and disadvantaged by the advance of industrialization and the emergence of corporate behemoths." Although he is best remembered for two events--his electrifying "cross of gold" speech at the 1896 Democratic convention and his work for the prosecution in the Scopes trial of 1925--his career was extremely rich in incident. Cherny draws amply upon Bryan's own writings and correspondence to produce a portrait of the lifelong political crusader that, while comparatively short in length, offers a substantial evaluation of his legacy. "A succinct study in which the author combines a knowledge of the standard works in the field with original research and new insights and analysis. . . . His book is a serious and intelligent one that students, scholars, and a general public can read with pleasure and profit." Martin Ridge, *Annals of Iowa*