Kansas Populism

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PREFACE

Three decades ago there was a remarkable degree of interpretive unanimity concerning the Populist movement. Since then, especially in the last twenty years, this consensus has been shattered by a series of conflicting interpretations. Most of these revisionist studies have been critical, and some serious charges have been levied against Populism. C. Vann Woodward, an adherent of the earlier and more sympathetic view of Populism, has stated that if these charges were summed up “the Populists would be held partly responsible for Anglophobia, Negrophobia, isolationism, imperialism, jingoism, paranoidal conspiracy-hunting, anti-Constitutionalism, anti-intellectualism, and the assault upon the right of privacy.”¹ This by no means exhausts the list of charges in the full indictment of Populism, nor does it reflect the depth of disagreement among historians of the movement or among the dilettantes.

Populism’s first interpreters found that the Turner frontier thesis provided a rationale that explained its origin and ideology, while at the same time according it a place, rather begrudgingly, within the context of progressive political action.² Another, more recent, group of historians, discounting the validity of the Turner thesis, have sought to interpret the movement as an episode in the enduring tradition of American entrepreneurial radicalism. This newer rationale has emphasized the conflict inherent in a rapidly commercializing agrarian society that had allegedly retained many of the values
and ideals of a preindustrial age. To these scholars, the Populists were striving for a utopia that existed in the past; hence, Populism was portrayed as regressive-utopianism.⁴ But this removal of Populism from the ranks of progressivism has not gone unchallenged. Studies have appeared reasserting the case, in even stronger language, for Populism as a progressive response to industrial America.⁵ There is, then, considerable conflict in interpretation, making the Populist movement a major problem in American historiography.

This controversy has awakened a lively interest in the Populist movement; and, since much of the revisionist work has been predicated upon research from the general to the particular, a need has arisen for studies dealing with the movement in its local setting. In addition, work by George E. Mowry, Alfred D. Chandler, Otis L. Graham, Jr., and other students of progressive leadership has served to point up the need for similar studies of the Populist leadership—especially since there now is considerable disagreement about the relationship between the two movements.⁶

Kansas was probably the center of Midwestern Populism. It therefore provides an excellent opportunity for exploring some of the questions that have been raised. Taking advantage of that opportunity, the author has attempted to research and to write a study of the Kansas Populist leadership, and to place that leadership within its proper historical context—in other words, to write a history of Kansas Populism as well as a leadership study. Actually, the two are inseparable; but they could not successfully be managed that way. The leadership analysis demanded and received separate treatment. Also, the findings of that study revealed that a significant segment of that leadership had been active reformers for some
time before the Populist party was organized. The Gilded Age was their background, just as it was the background of the Populist movement, and the need for an appraisal of that controversial age became all too obvious. Briefly, then, it was this situation that dictated the particular approach employed in the following pages.

The author would also like to acknowledge a special debt in advance to two men who preceded him with path-finding works on the subject of Kansas Populism—Raymond Miller and Walter T. K. Nugent. Although these two University of Chicago scholars are in no way responsible for what follows, this study was fashioned on the foundation they constructed. In particular, the author would like to state that he has not made a calculated effort to reassess the economic origins of Kansas Populism, which Miller has done in his unpublished dissertation; nor has he made a special effort to deal with the charges of anti-Semitism and nativism, which Nugent has done in his *Tolerant Populists*. Suffice it to say, Miller's work has been an invaluable aid, and the material encountered substantiated Nugent's findings precisely. Finally, the author would like to acknowledge a more indirect debt to Richard Hofstadter and Norman Pollack, who have reopened this whole subject and touched off a discussion that will culminate in a more meaningful understanding of Populism.

*O. G. C.*
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