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RHODA JANZEN

**Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home
HENRY HOLT AND CO., 2009. 256 PAGES**

Rhoda Janzen's *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* is bound to evoke diverse responses based on the reader's relationship to Mennonite culture. Therefore it makes sense to begin with my perspective as a Catholic who has worked at Fresno Pacific University for eight years and whose husband is an ethnic Mennonite with a large family of Friesens and Nickels. I have often turned to literature for further insight into this community that I have come to know well, such as the poetry of Jean Janzen and Julia Kasdorf, Jeff Gundy's *Scattering Point*, Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, and Rudy Wiebe's *Of This Earth*. I picked up Janzen's memoir as part of this ongoing journey.

I quickly understood why many of my colleagues are less than amused by this sarcastic portrait of growing up Mennonite in Fresno. The paperback edition is covered in book reviews asserting that Janzen's "hilarious" jabs at her family are based on love. Yet the tone seemed more complex than a witty send-up of Old World heritage in the manner of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. I found that I was not able to enjoy the humor due to its underlying venomousness and a sense that the relentlessly witty narrator is acting the role of Class Clown, covering up deep hurts and brokenness with sexually explicit jokes and obscenities. I found myself wanting to ask the author about underlying emotions that she doesn't fully explore.

For example, Janzen briefly recounts the memory of a Vacation Bible School staff member who made a sexual proposition to her. She quickly moves past this episode, but it begs further serious reflection, especially since she remembers that night as the turning point when she realized that she couldn't believe in the Christian faith: "What of religion itself? Clouds, tornadoes, sins awhirl before some imagined but necessary altar—a Perfect Storm of jingoism!" She attributes this epiphany to the poster contest that took place right before the sexual harassment, but couldn't that terrible incident be linked to her decision to distance herself from organized religion as an adult?

While Janzen's satires of religious life are reminiscent of liberal Christian non-fiction by Anne Lamott and Donald Miller, she was not an active Christian at the time of writing. Her narrator believes in God but does not attend church, believe in Satan or angels, proselytize, or make prayer requests, so she can't be blamed for rejecting biblical commands like "Honor your father and mother." Yet her status as church outsider becomes a problem when she claims to speak for all Mennonites, disregarding their religious foundation and presenting herself as an expert who can describe them accurately to a secular audience.

The memoir ends with a conciliatory moment in which a trip to a lavender farm makes her appreciate her heritage, but this is undercut by an Appendix called "A Mennonite History Primer" in which she cracks adolescent jokes about the need for a website called MyMennonitePanty.com and makes fun of everything from martyrdom to political persecution. She mocks the Mennonite occupation of Ukraine: "It wasn't our fault that the entire native population was shiftless, unmotivated, and blighted by poor economic judgment, but we could fix that shit!" In relation to pacifism she questions: "Did Jesus lift a finger to fight back when they came to crucify him? No! Jesus preferred a lifestyle of homosocial bonding and potluck luncheons!" My church does not preach pacifism, but I still found myself offended at this flippant approach to five hundred years of sincere religious conviction.

The Appendix ends with an address to an implied reader who has no personal contact with Mennonites: "The above summary of Mennonite culture is probably much more to the point than whatever's on Wikipedia. If you have paid close attention to the preceding pages, you are ready to meet Mennonites in real life." The most troubling aspect of this book is that thousands of readers might believe this. One can only hope that if they do meet Mennonites in real life, they are ready to listen to the many other stories of faith, doubt, and reconciliation that make up the diversity of Mennonite experiences in the United States and around the world.

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ANTHONY ARTHUR

**Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair
RANDOM HOUSE, 2006. 400 PAGES**

MICHAEL KAZIN

**A Godly hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan
ALFRED A. KNOPF, 2006. 374 PAGES**

MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON

**Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007. 351 PAGES**

In preparation for a 20th century American history course, I read three biographies that introduce figures that in different ways influenced American society during the first half of the 20th century. They are William Jennings Bryan, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Upton Sinclair: a politician, a preacher and a writer.

Reading biographies can be a helpful way to gain insights into individual beliefs and decision-making practices. In a good biography the narrative is complete and holistically constructed. It is the place where history, sociology, and psychology meet; where the individual and societal forces confront the interconnected nature of human life. There are inherent weaknesses in biographies. Even when the biographer tries hard not to let this happen, it is easy for the reader to get so caught up in the personal story that he/she forgets the social, economic, and political forces that have influenced the narrative (in and out of real time). But biography also provides an important corrective to the assumed objectivity of standard historical assessments. What follows are a few examples of this phenomenon in the three selected works.

For example, in his study of the Democratic Party politician and public speaker William Jennings Bryan, historian Michael Kazin emphasizes that Bryan's support for the fundamentalist Christian assault on the teaching of evolution was founded in Bryan's anti-imperialistic, as well as populist, aversion to the influence of Social Darwinism on American public policy. Instead of characterizing Bryan's biblical literalism as provincial and uninspired, Kazin shows that it formed the basis for

Bryan's opposition to the Spanish-American War, United States involvement in the Philippines, and the nation's early support for the Allied side in World War I (which caused Bryan to resign his post as secretary of state in 1914). In Bryan's view, imperialistic ventures were intimately connected to the Social Darwinist extension of *Origin of Species* teaching (an extension never advocated by Darwin himself). This justified colonial expansion and the intervention in the internal affairs of other countries (i.e., the survival and ascendancy of those nations that were most fit).

Bryan also believed that Social Darwinism provided a fraudulent philosophical foundation for free enterprise capitalism and limited government, which went against his own commitment to democratically determined government intervention on behalf of farmers, small businessmen, and laborers (for example, the eight-hour day). In Bryan's view, the teaching of evolution also provided a secularist foundation for the eugenics movement he opposed. Losing the presidential contest three times (in 1896, 1900, and 1908) and finding his political influence waning after quitting Woodrow Wilson's first cabinet, Bryan became a popular lecturer and preacher on the fundamentalist circuit, but he also continued to speak on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Bryan effectively espoused both conservative Christianity and the Social Gospel.

Historian Matthew Sutton provides similar corrective insights in his study of Pentecostal evangelist and church leader Aimee Semple McPherson. Notwithstanding McPherson's association with wealthy parishioners, prominent civic leaders, and even a few movie stars (she built her Foursquare Gospel denomination and the Angelus Temple in the Los Angeles area), Sutton notes that McPherson was also strongly committed to the social dimension of the Christian faith, in the style of William Jennings Bryan. While she did not favor publicly funded government programs, McPherson expected committed members of her Christian congregation to provide food, housing, and jobs for poor people in the Los Angeles basin.

McPherson was also a feminist—in practice if not in theory—and broke the mold of traditional Protestant sexism in the pulpit. As McPherson put it in an early sermon, “Oh, don’t you ever tell me that a woman cannot be called to preach the Gospel! If any man went through one-hundredth part of the hell on earth that I lived

in, those months when out of God's will and work, they would never say that again" (13). McPherson embraced the new "flapper" image popular in the 1920s, supporting women who were not afraid to bob their hair and chew gum in public.

Like William Jennings Bryan (who preached at Angelus Temple), McPherson also attacked the teaching of evolution, blaming it for everything from jazz and bootleg booze to a growing crime wave and suicide rate. She also attacked Social Darwinism, suggesting it promoted complacency among individual Christians, who preferred to focus attention on making money instead of serving humanity. At the Bible college McPherson established in Los Angeles students not only took courses in evangelism and hermeneutics, but also hospital visitation, prison work, and health education. McPherson usually supported Republican Party positions, but unlike most political conservatives, she supported United States entry into the League of Nations. Bryan and McPherson are very different people who represent in many ways totally different constituencies, but they both had a foundational commitment to the Christian faith.

The writer and sometime politician Upton Sinclair too called himself a Christian, but he was a modernist who adhered to a theology vehemently attacked by Bryan and McPherson. Sinclair did not believe in scientifically unexplainable or supernatural phenomena. Instead, "the core of his Christian doctrine was the image of Jesus as a revolutionary leader who worked for the poor" (179). In this respect the established church was very often Sinclair's nemesis. While in agreement with Bryan's populist and anti-imperialist political agenda, Sinclair thought the perennial presidential nominee's religious beliefs were archaic and the churches that supported him in his attack on secularism usually stood in the way of social progress.

English Professor Anthony Arthur also the author of a fascinating portrait of the 16th century Anabaptist revolutionary Jan Van Leiden, (*The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster*) reviews the many ways Sinclair attacked the Christian churches (for example, in *The Profits of Religion*) for working hand-in-hand with corporate capitalism. Sinclair placed his hope instead in the philosophy of democratic socialism. Accepting many of the same positions as the populist William Jennings Bryan, Sinclair expected a much greater role for government (working democratically on behalf of the common people) in order to create a more perfect social and political order.

Upton Sinclair was a prolific writer who first gained notoriety as the muckraking author of *The Jungle* (1906), a book that upset Theodore Roosevelt while it pushed him to support passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. In 1934, Sinclair also made a strong effort to become governor of California. The fact that he was able to take control of the state's Democratic Party was, as Arthur puts it, "a monumental achievement for a writer, unprecedented in American history" (255). But Sinclair's economic program ("Ending Poverty in California") was not a winner and he was heavily outspent by his Republican opponent, Frank Merriam, while being excoriated by big business, the press, the churches, and even the YMCA and Louis B. Mayer (who used his movie studio to attack the candidate). Aimee Semple McPherson as well worked actively against Sinclair's election, preaching he would "turn the state into a Communist laboratory" (Sutton, 227). Sinclair later blamed the election results on what he called a "betrayal" by Franklin D. Roosevelt, from whom he expected a promised endorsement that never materialized. Not a single California newspaper supported Sinclair and he lost by more than 10 percentage points.

William Jennings Bryan and Aimee Semple McPherson shared a common cause in the national anti-evolution and anti-modernist ideological debate. Both were theological fundamentalists, but they held different political perspectives, with Bryan more supportive of government regulation and less nationalistic with regard to American foreign policy. Amazingly, Upton Sinclair supported many of the same social programs as Bryan, but he despised fundamentalism and did not believe there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the writings of Charles Darwin and William Graham Sumner's interpretation of Social Darwinism.

Each of the biographies, through narrative analysis, looks at a variety of personal as well as political dynamics, from family relationships, jobs, and civic activities to ideological influences. Most importantly, each book shows the ideological and practical complexity of delivering a consistent message without loopholes and missing pieces.

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