

# Skirmisher: The Life, Times, and Political Career of James B. Weaver

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*Skirmisher: The Life, Times, and Political Career of James B. Weaver*, by Robert B. Mitchell. Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2008. 250 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth.

Reviewer Peter H. Argersinger is professor of history at Southern Illinois University. His books include *Populism: Its Rise and Fall* (1992) and *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: American Politics and Western Populism* (1995).

“Jumping Jim” Weaver was among the most prominent — and polarizing — leaders of the agrarian reform movements that swept Iowa and much of the nation in the late nineteenth century. As a congressman, presidential nominee of Greenbackers in 1880 and Populists in 1892, and perennial aspirant for innumerable other offices, Weaver often seemed the public face of political protest while at the same time he engaged in backroom dealings that his followers condemned as unscrupulous and counterproductive. Fred Emory Haynes wrote an early biography, *James Baird Weaver* (1919), which, while still useful today, scarcely resolved all the issues of this controversial Iowan, and its style, relying on long quotations from contemporary newspapers, often provided more the flavor than an analysis of the period’s politics.

Robert B. Mitchell’s new book, *Skirmisher: The Life, Times, and Political Career of James B. Weaver*, offers a fresh examination of this important political leader. Quickly tracing Weaver’s youth and education, Mitchell emphasizes the developing deep religious beliefs that would help shape Weaver’s career. Those beliefs contributed to Weaver’s abandonment of the Democratic Party over the issue of slavery in the 1850s and his local involvement in building the Republican Party in Iowa. When the Civil War broke out, Weaver helped organize the Second Iowa Infantry and played a valuable role in Union military victories in Tennessee and Mississippi, eventually receiving a brevet appointment as brigadier general.

His Republican ties and military record brought the ambitious Weaver quick political success in postwar Iowa, but party factionalism and his commitment to prohibition unexpectedly cost him a congressional nomination in 1874 and a gubernatorial nomination in 1875. Those political failures soured Weaver on the Iowa Republican Party, as did his more slowly awakened interest in the economic issues of agrarian protest. When he joined the Greenback Party, Republicans dismissed him as simply a disappointed and “insatiable office seeker” (71), but Mitchell defends Weaver’s decision as wholly consistent with his religious beliefs and crusading personality. Economic discontent and fusion with the Democrats enabled the Greenbackers to elect Weaver to Congress, where he championed economic and political reforms. His oratorical flair and parliamentary skills brought Weaver

first national attention and then the Greenbackers' presidential nomination in 1880. He launched an active campaign, spreading the gospel of economic reform and ensuring him, although defeated, continued leadership in third-party politics. Thereafter, Weaver used his influence to promote fusion with Democrats as the only practical means to electoral success, and he was elected to Congress twice more on that basis.

As Greenbackers gave way to the Farmers' Alliance and the rise of the People's Party in the 1890s, Weaver remained active, alternately restraining and encouraging independent politics. His 1892 book, *A Call to Action*, which has long awaited the attention Mitchell commendably devotes to it, helped to crystallize Populist complaints against unjust corporations and unresponsive government and to bring Weaver the new party's presidential nomination in 1892. Although Weaver carried several western states, southern hostility and eastern indifference ensured another defeat. Weaver then championed the issue of free silver as a basis for constructing a successful political coalition, only to undermine the independence and survival of the People's Party by pushing it into fusion with the Democrats of William Jennings Bryan and still another defeat in 1896. Weaver continued to work with Bryan, seek office himself, and champion reform, if steadily less radical, until his death in 1912.

There is much to like in this book. It is very well written and should appeal to a general audience. Although sympathetic to Weaver, Mitchell recognizes his "outsized ego," "self-aggrandizing theatricality" (157), and "vainglorious posturing" (4). The emphasis on Weaver as driven by religious principles and righteous indignation, rather than radical commitments, is an important contribution, and in accord with other recent studies stressing religious influences in agrarian politics. And Mitchell successfully describes the Iowan's significance as lying not in the conventional measures of laws enacted or offices won but in expanding public discussion of important issues, particularly the proper role for the government, and in helping reshape presidential campaigning. The latter conclusion echoes the findings of Mark Lause in *The Civil War's Last Campaign: James B. Weaver, the Greenback-Labor Party, and the Politics of Race and Section* (2001).

Other matters are more troublesome. Mitchell's easy linkage of Weaver's positions to subsequent progressive reforms sometimes rests on *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* reasoning or resembles simple, and anachronistic, textbook descriptions. Indeed, Mitchell often relies on dated textbooks such as Ray Allen Billington's *Westward Expansion* (1974) or general studies such as Ray Ginger's *Age of Excess* (1975). His work suffers further from a limited acquaintance with more specialized rele-

vant scholarship on Populism, Congress, and Iowa and national politics, some of which would compel him to revise arguments or address additional issues. Worse, his primary research was too limited to permit a comprehensive or fully persuasive biography. While making good use of the limited papers of Weaver and Bryan, the author otherwise ignored important manuscript collections of Greenbackers such as "Calamity" Weller, Populists such as Ignatius Donnelly and Marion Butler, and other reformers such as Henry Demarest Lloyd, all of which contain valuable material on Weaver, some of it casting him in a less attractive light than does this biography. The limited research base also leads to an often unbalanced book, with events or issues seemingly discussed not because of their importance but because of the easy accessibility of sources. Thus an inconsequential cattle drive to California in 1853, for instance, receives seven pages of coverage because Weaver wrote about it, but Weaver's extensive, controversial, and significant activities in 1895 to control the Populist Party and promote fusion, widely discussed in manuscript collections and newspapers not examined, earn only a few sketchy sentences.

In some respects, then, this book only supplements rather than supplants Haynes's old biography. But it does succeed in calling deserved attention to an important political figure; perhaps it will also succeed in encouraging further research and a fuller understanding of Weaver and the agrarian political movements he sometimes dominated.

*Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen*, by Christopher Capozzola. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xi, 334 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

*Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, by Ernest Freeberg. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. ix, 380 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Bill R. Douglas lives and works in Des Moines. He has written about World War I dissent in articles for *Minnesota History*, *Annals of Iowa*, *Wapsipinicon Almanac*, and *Free Flowing*.

In her novel *The Bonney Family*, Iowan Ruth Suckow portrays her protagonist Sarah Bonney volunteering to quilt with other women during World War I, while silently denying the spoken consensus that knitting would win the war or that she would want that. While he does not cite Suckow, Christopher Capozzola would say that Sarah Bonney experienced "coercive voluntarism." In an ambitious, imaginative, and admirable synthesis, he seeks to explain the dissonance. He has assembled