

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2006

Book Review: A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854-1903

Jeffrey A. Johnson

Augustana College - Sioux Falls

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Johnson, Jeffrey A., "Book Review: A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854-1903" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 100.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/100>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854-1903. By O. Gene Clanton. Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 2004. xvi + 328 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, appendixes, index. \$24.95 paper.

Across the landscape of modern American politics, the “Populist moment,” as Lawrence Goodwyn’s 1976 study labeled it, has fascinated scholars. Indeed, late nineteenth-century Populism posed a vocal and effectual political voice for Gilded Age America’s discontented. Since his original 1969 study, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men*, O. Gene Clanton has meticulously examined the fundamental role of Kansas Populists in shaping local and national politics. *A Common Humanity*, with great efficacy, revisits and reinterprets Kansas’s Populism as a fight for fundamental working-class rights and agrarian values, amidst industrialization gone awry.

Without question, as Clanton exhibits, the late nineteenth century witnessed exponential economic growth, yet at a great cost for rank-and-file laborers. The economic discord of the late nineteenth century facilitated dissenting political voices. From a milieu of late nineteenth-century third-party alternatives, and especially from the Grange and Farmer's Alliances, came the Populists—for Clanton a political reaction, on behalf of human rights, to skewed systems of monopoly and Social Darwinism.

A Common Humanity, like Clanton's earlier work, emphasizes the central personalities among the Kansas Populists. Not only are the more colorful activists central to the story, including the outspoken Mary Lease, but the author also presents thorough demographic analyses of the Populist leadership. The movement, he concludes, was an educated, rural middle-class cause, contrasted with a business-dominated Republican Party. The 1893 Populist-controlled Kansas House, for example, contained primarily farmers and stock raisers, while the Republican Senate seated primarily business professionals. For Kansas Populists, however, the challenges of politicized racism, prohibition, fusion, and political slander shook their hopes of political permanency. Despite gubernatorial and congressional victories in the early 1890s, the loose footing of the 1896 fusion with William Jennings Bryan and the Democrats began a process of political unraveling. Many Populists, Clanton explains, accepted less independence with fusion, defected to the Republican Party, or left for the Socialist Labor Party.

While Clanton's treatment of selected Populist leaders is exhaustive, the text could offer more detail on who and where the state movement's rank and file toiled, politically and otherwise. The book's first two chapters, moreover, which the author reveals were omitted from earlier works, noticeably read as extraneous to the specific Kansas story. Finally, while at his analytical best here at times, Clanton might have more clearly interwoven throughout the monograph how Kansas Populists kept

true to their humanitarian ideals, specifically the fight for "the common humanity," in addition to the thoughts provided in the introduction and conclusion.

These observations aside, the book provides a rather exhaustive description of Kansas Populism, while simultaneously placing it in the broader national movement. These men and women, Clanton effectively argues, remained central to the much broader late-nineteenth-century themes of class and reform. Those interested in Populism's Great Plains beginnings and particularly its leadership will find *A Common Humanity* a valuable and detailed resource.

JEFFREY A. JOHNSON
Department of History
Augustana College, Sioux Falls