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Coxey's Army: Popular Protest in the Gilded Age

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Coxey's Army: Popular Protest in the Gilded Age, by Benjamin F. Alexander. Witness to History Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 159 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$50.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback & e-book.

Reviewer Carlos A. Schwantes is St. Louis Mercantile Library Professor of Transportation Studies at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. He is the author of *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (1985) and “Soldiers of Misfortune: Jack London, Kelly’s Army, and the Struggle for Survival in Iowa” (*Annals of Iowa*, 1983).

During the spring of 1894 Americans were fascinated by their new national “soap opera” popularly known as Coxey’s Army. For most of the past year as the United States suffered through the most devastating economic depression it had yet experienced, the news had been uniformly bad. But here was something new and even entertaining: during the six weeks that Coxey’s Army marched from northern Ohio to Washington, the unscripted drama captured newspaper headlines and the nation’s attention as Americans wondered each day what would happen next.

At one level, the daily details of the march as published in newspapers across the United States offered comic relief from the grim news of the depression: it was a dramatic performance that featured a colorful and often comedic cast of characters. But Coxey’s Army was also interesting for the same reason that television contests capture their audiences today — because their outcomes are uncertain. The serious side of the march by the unemployed was captured in a single question: What would happen once Coxey’s unprecedented “petition in boots” reached Washington and sought to present to Congress its proposal for depression relief? Adding to the national foreboding were the many copycat armies that sought to rendezvous with Coxey in the District of Columbia and add their number to his 200 or so marchers headed to Capitol Hill. Among the best known of the other protest groups was Kelley’s Army, which had the good fortune to have as its chronicler the future novelist Jack London, who kept a diary as he plodded across Iowa.

For his retelling of the Coxey saga, Benjamin F. Alexander has done an impressive amount of research, combing through every conceivable source for information. Still more impressive is how the author places the saga of Coxey’s Army in its historical context as a chapter in the history of American reform and among the key events that defined the Gilded Age. Readers of *Coxey’s Army* will find that Alexander has woven together a satisfying blend of colorful narrative and serious analysis of how yesterday’s seemingly crackpot proposals later became a favored solution to massive unemployment such as took place during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Interestingly, there is one source that neither Alexander nor I knew about when we wrote our respective books on Coxe's Army: an unpublished autobiography written by Coxe's grandson titled "82 and Still Counting." A couple of years ago a Coxe descendant mailed me a copy of the thick manuscript. The document is interesting for the personal details it provides about "The General" from the perspective of a close family member. The author recalled, for example, that, as a boy, he met his grandfather while walking down the streets of Massillon, Ohio, the family's home town, the old man usually failed to recognize him, Coxe's mind apparently being focused instead on his many ideas. Indeed, Coxe provided the philosophical impetus behind the march on Washington, but it was his California sidekick, the ever colorful Carl Browne, who turned the event into a lively spectacle beloved and occasionally manipulated by journalists eager to sell newspapers.

Alexander's distillation of the details of the march and its leading personalities together with a thorough examination of its long-term significance makes for good reading and a worthy addition to John's Hopkins University Press's Witness to History book series. In addition to his highly readable text, Alexander thoughtfully includes a detailed map of the route of Coxe's march, a variety of pictures, detailed notes, and a list of suggestions for further reading.

Prairie Visions: Writings by Hamlin Garland, edited by Keith Newlin; photographs by Jon Morris. Des Moines: The Iowan Books, 2015. 175 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$21.95 paperback.

Reviewer Elizabeth Raymond is professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno. She has written extensively about a sense of place in the American West and Midwest.

Prairie Visions is a project in historical revival, reintroducing early work by a writer who is not today well known, and reimagining the landscape of the Iowa prairies as they were first being broken. The book republishes articles by Iowa author Hamlin Garland that first appeared in *American Magazine* in 1888. According to biographer Keith Newlin, these articles were Garland's first published prose works. Later, somewhat reconfigured, they formed the basis of *Boy Life on the Prairie*, published by Macmillan in 1899 and frequently reprinted. This earliest version of Garland's boyhood sketches, however, appears here for the first time since 1888. Garland was an important regionalist writer at the turn of the century, perhaps best known for his short story collection *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891). In that volume he realistically depicted the drudgery