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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Teamster Politics* by Farrell Dobbs

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Canada to the Minnesota West of the 1850s, his subsequent "risen from the ranks" ascent to power and fame, accomplished in the approved nineteenth-century Horatio Alger manner, and his ultimate recognition as a Captain of Industry, a kind of commercial and industrial knighthood inferentially conferred upon American tycoons by a nation that professed to abhor titles but whose businessmen sought them avidly.

Because Hill devoted a lifetime to the development of his far-flung empire, the greater possibilities for which were agricultural, it is not out of place that the author chose to divide his book in sections called "Seedtime," "Growth," and "Harvest." The first stanza ends in 1879, designated as a year of triumph, one that signified firm control of the old, bankrupt St. Paul and Pacific Railroad that was succeeded by the aggressive St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway. As the latter name suggests, Hill pointed his earlier efforts in the direction of his native Canada.

The "Growth" part of the book, extending from the important year 1879 to 1895, covers the emergence of the again renamed road, the Great Northern, and its completion to the West Coast in 1893. The "Harvest" section takes the story down to Hill's death in 1916 and depicts a period when the railroader really came into his own, not only making a success of a transcontinental road completed in the panic year but continuing on to greater heights represented by the consolidation of the Great Northern with the Northern Pacific and the Burlington lines — a master stroke that was undone, for the moment, by the Northern Securities suit initiated in Theodore Roosevelt's first administration.

This is an excellent piece of work. It utilizes an enormous amount of original sources (among them collections at the Hill Reference Library in St. Paul and the Minnesota Historical Society) and supplies considerable enrichment through the use of detailed background material that helps to etch a sharp picture of Hill the man. It is set forth in an engaging manner, producing a very pleasant and informative result. Much has been written about railroads in the past four or five decades, perhaps too much, and some relatively insignificant lines have been treated. During this time the Great Northern Railway and the empire that sprouted from it have yearned for attention. Hill, his Canadian and American financial associates, and the railroad proper now have been recognized in a rich, attractive account. What might be called "Great Northern Country" awaits its historian, and when he emerges Martin's important volume will have provided the necessary prologue to this more extended study.

*Reviewed by* ROBERT G. ATHEARN, *professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder and author of numerous works of western and railroad history.*

### ***Teamster Politics.* By Farrell Dobbs.**

(New York, Monad Press, 1975. 256 p. Illustrations. Hard cover \$10.00, paper \$2.95.)

IN THIS VOLUME Farrell Dobbs continues his account of the crucial years of labor organization, radical activities, and labor politics in Minnesota during the critical Great Depression decade.

In *Teamster Rebellion* (1972) Dobbs concentrated on the major strike event of the 1930s — the Minneapolis truckers' strike of 1934. In *Teamster Power* (1973) the author discussed the organizational expansion of the Teamsters to include over-the-road drivers. In *Teamster Politics* he describes the role of the Trotskyists in the political upheavals of the depression period.

The latest book, like the previous ones, is based on the author's personal experiences, his memory being refreshed by consulting press accounts of events described, his personal papers, and documents submitted to him by various researchers. It is primarily a memoiristic account of a participant in the events rather than a dispassionate historical narrative. The author has not consulted the major manuscript collections of individuals and organizations available mainly at the Minnesota Historical Society. Thus his account of politics is a one-sided narrative, which is usually the case with memoirs.

The author's purpose is to chronicle the "correct" revolutionary line of the Trotskyists in the political events described. Thus to the author everyone in the labor movement but the Trotskyists were either labor bureaucrats, gangs of class collaborationist misleaders, or opportunists. Analysis of Farmer-Labor politics remains on this level in the author's attempt to justify and proclaim the consistent class-conscious politics of the Trotskyists as either Workers party members, absorbed in or absorbing the Socialist party in 1936, or as trade union participants within the Farmer-Labor Association. Post-1935 collaboration of the Stalinists with the New Deal and their activities within the Farmer-Labor Association are particularly, and in part justifiably, chastised.

The Farmer-Labor party's role is seen as the ". . . de facto contributor to preservation of the capitalist ruling structure, thereby impeding a working-class advance toward a revolutionary orientation." In this light it is then understandable that the Trotskyists would attempt to sabotage Farmer-Labor party activities which would lead to its demise after 1938.

But it is refreshing to read an account which can retrospectively uncover no errors in past policy or its execution by the group led by the author. Thus the Trotskyist collaboration with the most conservative elements within the Minneapolis Central Labor Union to undermine the candidacy of Kenneth C. Haycraft for Minneapolis mayor in 1937 by supporting the discredited Thomas E. Latimer — thereby allowing the election of George E. Leach, reactionary Republican — is seen as consistent class-conscious politics.

The author has no sober second thought regarding the Trotskyist role in undermining the re-election efforts of Elmer A. Benson for governor in 1938, thus objectively supporting the anti-Semitic reactionary groups aligned first with the Hjalmar Petersen primary campaign and then with the Harold E. Stassen election campaign. Although the author deals extensively with the appearance of the anti-Semitic Silver Shirts as a threat to trade unionism, he does not relate the same phenomenon to its role in the Benson defeat of 1938.

In a well-written and lively manner, the author recounts the role of the Trotskyist Teamsters within the labor movement, their relationship with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and their role in Minnesota politics. He also deals with the role of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the history of labor organization, the Trotskyist role in organizing

the unemployed, the relationship between them and the Communist-influenced Workers' Alliance, and finally the national WPA strike, centered in Minneapolis, and the legal repression which followed.

Students of Minnesota politics and American labor will have to consult Dobbs's work, not as final word or authority, but rather as a valuable source document to which the usual canons of historical evaluation for authenticity and bias will have to be applied.

*Reviewed by HYMAN BERMAN, professor of history at the University of Minnesota and a specialist in labor history.*

**Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist. By W. A. Swanberg.**

(New York, Scribner's, 1976. 528 p. \$14.95.)

THIS IS an intimate, warm biography of the late Socialist leader. It traces the story of Norman Thomas from his boyhood in Marion, Ohio, where he delivered newspapers for publisher Warren G. Harding, to his last days in a nursing home, where he died in 1968 just after the presidential election of that year. The drama and interest of the account are heightened by a large number of good photographs, which show Thomas in several settings from youth to the latter part of his career.

Thomas came from a remarkable family — his father was a minister — which had very exacting ideals. The children of the family pursued varied careers, some of them, including Norman, revolting against the theological and political commitments of their parents.

Swanberg traces Thomas' educational career from his undergraduate years at Princeton through theological seminary and his learning experiences as a social worker. Thomas might have gone far as a religious leader, but after a time at the Brick Presbyterian Church he found his faith wavering with respect to what the church could or would do to alleviate the lot of mankind. He could no longer believe in the God of his fathers. Instead, he turned to activities in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and, later on, in the Socialist party.

He was a vigorous opponent of American entry into World War I, and one of the central strains of his political leadership thereafter was his opposition to war. During his long career as a leader of the Socialist party, the war issue was equal in importance to civil liberties and economic justice questions. While Swanberg gives us a good account of Thomas' struggle with the Old Guard in the Socialist party, discusses his relations with such factions as the "Militant" and "Clarity" groups, and touches on many political debates, he tends to emphasize Thomas' personal qualities: his amazing energy, his charm, his deep concern for injustices done to particular individuals, his relations with countless prominent persons (John Foster Dulles, for example, as well as Reinhold Niebuhr, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and many others), and, curiously enough, his enjoyment of "gossip." Swanberg seems to be less concerned with the details of Thomas' political positions than was Harry Fleischman in an earlier biography.

Besides making six efforts to win the presidency of the United States, Thomas was a Socialist candidate for many other offices — among them governor of the state of New York and

mayor of New York City. But always he went down to rather shattering defeat. Although he accepted defeat with good grace and humor and usually held out great hopes for the future, his optimism about the ultimate triumph of socialism began to fade somewhat during the latter part of his political life.

Missing in this biography is any detailed analysis of Thomas' style and qualities of political leadership. For many years Thomas so completely overshadowed others in the Socialist party that the development of alternative leadership was difficult if not impossible. Doubtless this was not entirely his fault. Yet one cannot help wondering whether the fate of the Socialist party might not have been different had he done more to encourage new leadership. After the defeat of the Old Guard, however, he seemed often to think that it was his due to be regarded as the chief leader. And most members of the party — sometimes rather slavishly — seemed to acquiesce. In party conventions, for example, I have seen speaker after speaker argue one position on an issue, with the other delegates seeming to agree, only to have Thomas rise toward the end of the discussion and take the opposite position. After this the delegates would reverse their stands almost as if they were machines. This following of the leader, not necessarily because of what he said but simply because he was Norman Thomas, was good neither for Thomas nor for his followers.

During the latter part of his life he was almost obsessed by the Vietnam War — it was a kind of magnificent obsession — and was one of its outstanding opponents. Aside from the period when he led opposition to American entry into World War II, this was probably his most glorious hour. When he appeared in Northrop Memorial Auditorium at the University of Minnesota to argue against the war, he was clearly the most vigorous and effective of all the speakers, despite his crippling arthritis and his near-blindness.

My last conversation with Norman Thomas was in 1966 when I was asked to present a War Resisters League award to him for his peace work. I was touched by the warmth of his greeting and his friendliness, particularly in light of the fact that I had opposed certain of his positions in Socialist conventions (I was for endorsement of unilateral disarmament, for example, and he was vigorously opposed). In responding to my remarks, he recounted the history of his attitudes to war and peace from World War I to the war in Vietnam. As Swanberg rightly emphasizes, Thomas remained to the end a remarkable crusader for his ideals and for social justice.

*Reviewed by MULFORD Q. SIBLEY, professor of political science and American studies at the University of Minnesota.*

**From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration.**

**Edited by Harald Runblom and Hans Norman.**

(Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, and Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1976. 391 p. \$20.00.)

THE SWEDISH mass migration to America, which from 1850 to 1930 brought more than one million Swedes to this country, is probably the best documented and most thoroughly analyzed of the population movements that made up the great Atlantic migrations. An important contribution toward that achievement has been the work of the Migration Research