

Ideas

JAMES BRYCE AND AMERICA

"A presidential election in America," observed James Bryce, "is something to which Europe can show nothing similar." For three months, the British visitor wrote, "processions, usually with brass bands, flags, badges, crowds of cheering spectators are the order of the day and night . . ." In 1888, the year that the Republicans' Benjamin Harrison narrowly vanquished the Democrats' Grover Cleveland, Bryce's mammoth portrait of *The American Commonwealth* was published on both sides of the Atlantic. Here, Morton Keller assesses this oft-quoted classic on U.S. politics, and its peripatetic Victorian author.

by Morton Keller

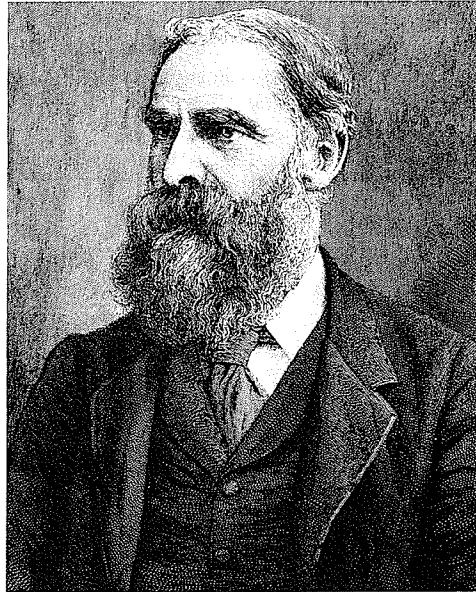
During the summer of 1870, two young British barrister-intellectuals, James Bryce and Albert V. Dicey, embarked on a voyage of discovery to the United States. Out of this trip (and two later visits) came one of the most widely read books ever written about America, Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*.

Bryce and Dicey were following in famous footsteps. Forty years earlier, another pair of young lawyers, Alexis de Tocqueville and his friend Gustave de Beaumont, also undertook a journey to America. That visit resulted, of course, in Tocqueville's great *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840).

Bryce and Tocqueville had the same subject: the nature of American institutions, most particularly the country's politics and government. Both came to the New World as men of letters and public affairs, and as 19th-century European Liberals. In that turbulent experiment across the Atlantic, each sought answers to the most compelling political question of their time: What was, and what would be, the character of a young society whose guiding principles were individual freedom, political liberty, and democratic government?

Tocqueville called himself "a liberal of a new kind"; one who combined "a lively and rational passion for liberty" with an equally strong belief in the virtues of social order. (He came from a royalist family; his father narrowly escaped Robespierre's guillotine.) How to combine the two? That, as he saw it, was the great problem facing modern political philosophy.

Author James Bryce (1838–1922), here portrayed in middle age, became ambassador to Washington and an early advocate of the League of Nations after World War I.



He came to the United States in search of an answer. He found a society uniquely, passionately dedicated to the values of individual liberty and freedom of voluntary association. But, Tocqueville observed, it was also a society that imposed order (including the order of black slavery) through a conformity imposed by public opinion: a tyranny of the majority comparable, in his mind, to the tyranny of royal authority under the *ancien régime*.

Tocqueville's account of America's early 19th-century public and private institutions, and the values and manners of its people, is to this day the most profound of all inquiries into our society. More than that, *Democracy in America* remains a seminal text on the strengths and deficiencies of democracy as a system of political organization.

And what of Bryce and *The American Commonwealth* 40 years later? What led this enormously bright, learned, energetic Scots-Irishman to set out for the United States in 1870 (and again in 1881 and 1883–84)? What prompted him to make American government and politics his chief intellectual interest for almost 20 years, to produce a three-volume study, over 1,800 pages in the first edition, and then doggedly to add, revise, and amend on a large scale in three succeeding editions? (Tocqueville never returned to the United States after his 1830 visit, never revised *Democracy in America*, and showed little further interest in the new society he had so tellingly described.)

The answer lies in the kind of man that Bryce was, and in the purpose of *The American Commonwealth*. He criticized Tocqueville for having too philosophical a purpose: "It is not democracy in America he describes, but his own theoretic view of democracy illustrated from America."

Bryce, by contrast, sought knowledge directly and massively accumulated,

and then turned to systematic analysis. His was a positivist, Victorian intellectual style exemplified in the work of both Karl Marx and Charles Darwin. (Late in life, Bryce recalled that reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* was one of the most exciting intellectual experiences of his youth.) In spirit and approach, *The American Commonwealth* resembles other pioneering works of its time such as Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (Bagehot, like Bryce, subscribed to "the cardinal value of occasional little facts") and Woodrow Wilson's *Congressional Government*.



Bryce was an inveterate collector—of facts, experience, people. Philosopher William James once said that to Bryce, "all facts were born free and equal." And he led one of those breathtakingly active, productive Victorian lives that so astonish us today. He was born in Belfast and raised in Glasgow, the child of vigorously intellectual Scots-Irish Presbyterian parents. His father was a teacher. He entered Trinity College, Oxford, in 1857, successfully insisting on his right as a Dissenter not to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. Bryce was an academic prodigy, gathering up prizes, firsts, and fellowships as if they were collectibles. He then read law at Lincoln's Inn—at the same time writing a short history of the Holy Roman Empire that won him an international reputation. In 1870, at the age of 32, Bryce was appointed Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford, a well-paid sinecure that he held until 1893; he served as a member of Parliament for a quarter of a century and occupied three cabinet posts; he was British ambassador to the United States from 1907 to 1913; he was created a viscount in 1914; he served on government commissions looking into British education, German atrocities in World War I, and the reform of the House of Lords.

Bryce's avocations were no less numerous. He traveled to (and wrote a book about) every inhabited continent; by his own account in 1907, he had visited every country and capital in Europe, plus Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, South Africa, India, Asia Minor, the Greek isles, Transcaucasia, Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica, almost all of the United States and Canada—"also Iceland." Soon he added Australia and New Zealand, Japan, China, and Siberia to his itinerary. He swam in every body of water and climbed every mountain within reach (including Ararat, which he proudly, if erroneously, believed he was the first European to ascend); he botanized with near-professional skill, discovering 13 new species of plants in South Africa alone. Like so many Victorian intellectuals, Bryce was

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besotted by exotic places: The one major country whose politics and government he never systematically examined was Great Britain.

Small wonder that he did not find time to marry until he was 51. He never had children.

It would be no distortion to regard *The American Commonwealth* as both a Victorian travel book and a work of Victorian social science. It is the account of a journey through the world of late-19th-century American politics and government by an exceptionally urbane, well-informed, sharp-eyed visitor. One of Bryce's reviewers said, not unjustly, that his book attained everything that was possible with a camera.

And indeed, by amassing a mountain of facts, Bryce hoped to demonstrate how the people of the world's leading democracy governed themselves.

But there was, of course, no way of avoiding the generalizing for which he criticized Tocqueville, however different their conclusions were. "The general theory I have tried to set forth," he declared, "is that in the U.S. the impression of the direct governing power of opinion, as apart from legal machinery, is far stronger than in Europe; and that while there is very little abuse of power by the majority [here he takes issue with Tocqueville], there is, at least in the realm of thought, too much disposition to believe the majority right. But possibly I have strained the facts to prove the theory."



Bryce claimed that five-sixths of his data came from observation and from conversations with Americans. He traveled everywhere: not only to New England and the Northeast but also to the upper Midwest, the Pacific Coast, the South. In particular, he relied on the knowledge and insight of experts. He said that he tried "simply to piece together and reproduce the best views of the best American observers as I picked them up." On his first day in America, he looked up E. L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation* and the *New York Evening Post*, who became perhaps his most influential source. (He failed to acknowledge Godkin's aid in the preface to his first edition, an omission that the latter did not take well. Bryce explained that if he had properly recognized Godkin, critics would have said "(not without truth) that I was reproducing the *Evening Post* and Mugwump view.")

Other notables of the Northeast, such as Harvard's President Charles W. Eliot (who remained a lifelong friend), Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., economist and financier Edward Atkinson, and the rising young politician Theodore Roosevelt, also guided him. James Angell, president of the University of Michigan, and Washington Gladden, congregational minister and social reformer, advised him on the intricacies of Midwestern politics; Thomas M. Cooley, the judge and treatise writer, introduced him to the powerful constraints on state activism imposed by the Constitution and the political culture; historian Henry C. Lea instructed him on the politics of Pennsylvania, with its railroad barons, coal towns, and party patronage.

Bryce had the gifted traveler's knack of being in the right place at the right time. On his first visit to America in 1870, he managed to meet most of the

surviving lights of New England transcendentalism and the antislavery movement: Emerson, Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Samuel Gridley and Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the elder Oliver Wendell Holmes. His first direct exposure to American politics was at the 1870 New York State Democratic convention in Rochester, where he was able to see the regnant Tweed Ring and Tammany in full bloom.

The book that came out of Bryce's attentive listening, seeing, and reading was an exceptionally detailed, informed picture of late-19th-century American government and politics. Much of Parts I and II of *The American Commonwealth*, dealing with national and state government, may seem stilted and out-of-date when read today. But one chapter tried to answer a question that was germane before and after the Civil War, and is very much alive in our own time: "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President." Bryce concluded that "great men are rare in politics; . . . the method of choice may not bring them to the top; . . . they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed": not far from the present state of understanding.



Part III of *The American Commonwealth* (23 chapters, more than one-fifth of the first edition) discusses "The Party System"; here it comes alive. Bryce's perceptive description of party politics as practiced in the Gilded Age was the first, and in many ways remains the best, analysis ever written of the distinctive American system. Everything—bosses and machines, how they work and what they do; the machinery of elections; the color and passion of campaigns; the role of money and corruption—came within his view. Long before Moisey Ostrogorsky, Max Weber, and other European social scientists, Bryce recognized that "the spirit and force of party has in America been as essential to the action of the machinery of government as steam is to a locomotive engine In America the great moving forces are the parties. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more."

He held that American party politics historically embodied the conflict of two "permanent oppositions": between centralized and localized government and "between the tendency which makes some men prize the freedom of the individual as the first of social goods, and that which disposes others to insist on checking and regulating his impulses." In short, he discovered in America the same tension between "the love of liberty" and "the love of order" that so intrigued Tocqueville.

It might seem surprising that Bryce identified more closely with the Hamilton-Federalist-Republican than the Jefferson-Jackson-Democratic tradition. But it was a measure of the difference then between British and American political culture that Bryce, a member of the radical wing of mid-19th-century British Liberalism, was most comfortable with the more conservative sector of contemporary American politics.

In truth Bryce had little interest in American history (for which Woodrow Wilson, who reviewed the book when it appeared, chided him). Rather, his primary interest was in the American party politics of his own time, the 1870s

A BRYCE SAMPLER

On the American Character:

"They are a hopeful people. Whether or no they are right in calling themselves a new people, they certainly seem to feel . . . the bounding pulse of youth. They see a long vista of years stretching out before them, in which they will have time enough to cure all their faults, to overcome all the obstacles that block their path."

On the Separation of Powers:

"[The Founding Fathers] so narrowed the sphere of the executive as to prevent it from leading the country, or even its own party in the country, except indeed in a national crisis, or when the president happens to be exceptionally popular. They sought to make members of Congress independent, but in doing so they deprived them of some of the means which European legislators enjoy of learning how to administer, of learning even how to legislate in administrative topics. They condemned them to be architects without science, critics without experience, censors without responsibility."

On American Women:

"The respect for women which every American man either feels or is obliged by public sentiment to profess has a wholesome effect on his conduct and character, and serves to check the cynicism which some other peculiarities of the country foster. The nation as a whole owes to the active benevolence of its women, and their zeal in promoting social reforms, benefits which the customs of Continental Europe would scarcely have permitted women to confer."

On Politics and Sports:

"Even now business matters so occupy the mind of the financial and commercial classes, and athletic competitions the minds of the uneducated classes and of the younger sort in all classes, that political questions are apt, except at critical moments, to fall into the background."

On Presidential Elections:

"If the presidential contest may seem to have usually done less for the formation of political thought and diffusion of political knowledge than was to be expected from the immense efforts put forth and the intelligence of the voters addressed, it nevertheless rouses and stirs the public life of the country. One can hardly imagine what the atmosphere of American politics would be without this quadrennial storm sweeping through it to clear away stagnant vapours, and recall to every citizen the sense of his own responsibility for the present welfare and future greatness of his country. Nowhere does government by the people, through the people, for the people, take a more directly impressive and powerfully stimulative form than in the choice of a chief magistrate by 15 millions of citizens voting on one day."

and '80s. And here, to his displeasure, he found that "neither party has any principles, any distinctive tenets . . . Both have certainly war cries, organizations, interests enlisted in their support. But those interests are in the main . . . getting or keeping the patronage of the government. Tenets and policies, points of political doctrine, and points of political practice, have all but vanished . . . All has been lost, except office or the hope of it."

This disillusioned judgment appears to be at odds with his generally positive view of American institutions, and needs explaining. There was more to Bryce—and to *The American Commonwealth*—than facts, facts, facts. Both his letters and his masterwork had a strongly didactic tone; his book is as much the product of a moral and political philosophy as is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Bryce believed in Liberalism, the classic 19th-century Liberalism of John Bright and William Gladstone, of free trade, free speech and press, personal liberty, and *responsible* leadership. This notably genial, gregarious man had his hates, chief among them illiberal regimes: the Turkish oppressors of Bulgars and Armenians, and, later, the Kaiser's Reich in World War I.



For one holding such views, a close look at the United States of 1870 was irresistible. (Bryce toyed initially that year with a plan to cross the Channel and observe the Franco-Prussian War, but the lure of America was too great.) After a civil war fought—and won—for the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery, the United States was, in European Liberal eyes, the Golden Land. John Bright (with Gladstone one of the patron saints of Bryce's Liberalism) called the North's victory "the event of the age. The friends of freedom everywhere should thank God and take courage." The prevailing mood is evident in the English novelist-poet George Meredith's 1867 "Lines to a Friend [John Morley] Visiting America," which spoke of:

The strange experimental land
Where men continually dare take
Niagara leaps;

Adieu! bring back a braver dawn
To England, and to me, my friend.

Bryce then and later was distinctly more optimistic about the present health and future prospects of the country than were his American friends such as Godkin and Holmes. He says in *The American Commonwealth*: "A hundred times in writing this book have I been disheartened by the facts I was stating: A hundred times has the recollection of the abounding strength and vitality of the nation chased away these tremors." He told Godkin, "Having criticized the machinery of government and the party system rather more sharply than I quite like—but feeling bound to do so—I have sought in describing public opinion to set out the better side of the people and of politics."

To the end of his long life he was firm in the belief that "America marks the highest level, not only of well-being, but of intelligence and happiness, which the race has yet attained." His Scots-Irish Liberalism drew him powerfully to the relative lack in America of pauperism, class distinction, and class hatred, and the diffusion of wealth among small proprietors.

It is not surprising that his book was immensely popular in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. About a quarter of a million copies of its several editions and a widely used school abridgement were sold. It had less success in England (where one reviewer took Bryce to task for ignoring "the malaria, catarrh, earthquakes, blizzards and tornadoes" that "fill the cemeteries" of America).

But he was no Pangloss. By the time of *The American Commonwealth's* appearance in 1888, the post-Civil War euphoria of Bryce and his American friends had substantially diminished. He strongly shared Godkin's distaste for a political system dominated by machines and bosses (though he recognized more acutely than did upper-class American reformers that most professional politicians played a necessary role in American public life).

Perceptively he observed that while Englishmen spoke of "politicians," Americans called them "the politicians," thus bestowing on them the character of a distinct social group. He ranked public men in an elaborate hierarchy of moral and intellectual qualities, descending from "the non-professional or Outer Circle politicians, those who work for their party without desiring office," down to the large, immigrant-dominated cities: "As there are weeds that follow human beings, so this species thrives best in cities, and even in the most crowded parts of cities. It is known to the Americans as the 'ward politician.'"

Bryce's condemnation of city politics and government as the great failure of American civilization is perhaps his most famous *aperçu*. But he had little more use for state governments, which he dismissed as "perennial fountains of corruption"; state legislators "can barely read the Constitution, and the nature of its legal operation is as far beyond them as the cause of thunder is beyond cats." He devoted a chapter of his book to explaining "Why The Decent Men Do Not Go Into Politics."



There was much about American politics during the 1870s and '80s to repel a British (or American) Liberal intellectual. The Civil War era had been dominated by great issues of national identity and human freedom. Intellectuals and publicists were intoxicated by that political atmosphere. Godkin, who, like Bryce, was of Irish Protestant origins and immigrated to America in 1856, wrote to a friend during the war: "I am duly thanking Heaven that I live here and in this age." In 1865 he founded *The Nation* as an organ designed to apply to postwar issues the Liberal spirit of the crusades for antislavery and the Union.

The chaos and disillusionment of Reconstruction, and the increasing domination of the political system by machines and bosses, was a profound shock to the ideological Liberals of the Civil War era. The work of Thomas Nast, the pre-eminent political cartoonist of his time, vividly portrays the change in political

generations. During the 1860s, Nast, with great power, portrayed the antislavery, Unionist creed of Republicanism and Liberalism. In the same spirit, he created his famous images of the rapacious Tammany tiger and the gross, porcine Boss Tweed. But as the politics of organization superseded the politics of ideology, Nast produced what came to be the accepted symbols of the major parties: the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey. These were docile beasts, without strong symbolic meaning—eloquent embodiments of a politics that relied more on organization and sentiment than on ideology and purpose.

During the decades that followed, a running battle continued between politicians and genteel reformers. Bryce fully shared the distaste for party politics felt by most of his American friends. His own career in British politics was not unlike theirs. He never attained influence in Parliament or government commensurate with his abilities or reputation; and his dislike of British political professionals such as Joseph Chamberlain (who always referred to Bryce as “Professor”) or Randolph Churchill matched Godkin’s hatred of spoilsmen Roscoe Conkling and William McKinley.



The final sections of *The American Commonwealth* are given over to extended discussions of public opinion and—in the spirit of Tocqueville—American social institutions. Bryce’s analysis of public opinion in America lies somewhere between Tocqueville’s view of it as an independent force exercising all-powerful sway over American public life, and the more modern view (expressed by Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion*, 1922) that it is a compound of the irrationality of the masses and manipulation by powerful vested interests. Bryce recognized that popular opinion was a significant reality in American public life—politicians ignored it at their peril—but that it was also subject to the influence of leadership.

Most Americans, he thought, were influenced by sentiment rather than by informed opinion. But he still had faith in the judgment of the majority: “The masses of the People are wiser, fairer, and more temperate in any matter to which they can be induced to bend their minds than most European philosophers have believed it possible for the masses of the people to be.” Nor did he have any great faith in the wisdom of the well off: “The possession of property does more . . . to make a man timid than education does to make him hopeful.” Predictably, he believed that the best hope for American public life lay in the leadership of “the group of classes loosely called professional men”; the educated, public-spirited men who were his closest American friends; indeed, the “class” to which he himself belonged. Over the past 100 years, many an American Liberal reformer has felt the same way.

Bryce dealt also with a variety of social groups and institutions, ranging from the bar and the universities to Wall Street and the situation of American women. He shared the conventional view of his time that blacks and women should not participate in politics. He lumped together blacks and recent immigrants as a social “residuum” whose views were neither worthwhile nor significant. But he never gave voice to the then prevailing belief, shared by Liberals

and conservatives, in black racial inferiority. And his faith in the assimilative power of the nation was strong: "The future of America will be less affected by the influx of new blood than any one who has not studied the American democracy of today can realize."

In later years Bryce observed with growing alarm such developments as imperialism and the pre-World War I arms race, the rise of Big Business, organized labor, and, at home, socialism. These trends threatened to consign his classic 19th-century Liberalism to the dustbin of history. But he never gave way to the pessimism and despair that swept over Godkin or Henry Adams (who on renewing his acquaintanceship with Bryce in the early 1900s found his Liberalism naive). He wrote to an American friend in 1903: "The truth is that when I go to America I always see much that is depressing and disgusting, but I see also that many of the evils which I saw formerly have not increased, or are even diminishing; and I see also more clearly than before how grand are the evils arising around us in England. Hence it seems right to allow a wide margin in America for the action of the representative forces which have often proved stronger than was expected."

To the end—he died in 1922 at the age of 84—Bryce remained what he had always been, an archetypal Gladstonian Liberal. He was also widely regarded as the most learned, knowledgeable, polymathic Briton of his time. The English journalist A. G. Gardiner wrote in 1913: "If one were asked to name the greatest living Englishman, I think it would be necessary to admit, regretfully, that he was a Scotsman born in Ireland."

And yet there is a disparity between Bryce's qualities and his overall achievement—a gap evident in the book whose centennial we celebrate. Its description of the late-19th-century American polity assures it immortality. But we do not find in it the more profound insights into the nature of American society that Tocqueville's work continues to provide. The reason is that Bryce never was able to transcend his Liberalism as Tocqueville did. For all its rich detail, its recurrent, oft-quoted insights, the fact remains that while Bryce's book wonderfully illuminates its subject, it never takes the reader to a new level of understanding.

Nevertheless, on its own terms, *The American Commonwealth* remains a national treasure: a vivid, affectionate, informed portrait of how we were governed—and governed ourselves—a century ago.

