

The Rise and Fall of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a "Parable on Populism"

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The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is one of America's favorite pieces of juvenile literature. Children like it because it is a good story, full of fun characters and exciting adventures. Adults--especially those of us in history and related fields--like it because we can read between L. Frank Baum's lines and see various images of the United States at the turn of the century. That has been true since 1964, when *American Quarterly* published Henry M. Littlefield's "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism." Littlefield described all sorts of hidden meanings and allusions to Gilded Age society in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*: the wicked Witch of the East represented eastern industrialists and bankers who controlled the people (the Munchkins); the Scarecrow was the wise but naive western farmer; the Tin Woodman stood for the dehumanized industrial worker; the Cowardly Lion was William Jennings Bryan, Populist presidential candidate in 1896; the Yellow Brick Road, with all its dangers, was the gold standard; Dorothy's silver slippers (Judy Garland's were ruby red, but Baum originally made them silver) represented the Populists' solution to the nation's economic woes ("the free and unlimited coinage of silver"); Emerald City was Washington, D.C.; the Wizard, "a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a facade of paper mache and noise, . . . able to be everything to everybody," was any of the Gilded Age presidents. [\(1\)](#)

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was no longer an innocent fairy tale. According to Littlefield, Baum, a reform-minded Democrat who supported William Jennings Bryan's pro-silver candidacy, wrote the book as a parable of the Populists, an allegory of their failed efforts to reform the nation in 1896. "Baum never allowed the consistency of the allegory to take precedence over the theme of youthful entertainment," Littlefield hedged at one point; "the allegory always remains in a minor key." Still, he concluded that "the relationships and analogies outlined above . . . are far too consistent to be coincidental." [\(2\)](#)

It was an interesting notion, one scholars could not leave alone, and they soon began to find additional correspondences between Populism and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Richard Jensen, in a 1971 study of Midwestern politics and culture, devoted two pages to Baum's story. He implicitly qualified Littlefield by pointing out that not all pro-Bryan silverites were Populists. But Jensen then proceeded to add two new points to the standard Littlefield interpretation, finding analogies for Toto and Oz itself: Dorothy's faithful dog represented the teetotaling Prohibitionists, an important part of the silverite coalition, and anyone familiar with the silverites' slogan "16 to 1"--that is, the ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold--would have instantly recognized "Oz" as the abbreviation for "ounce." [\(3\)](#)

A few years later, literary scholar Brian Attebery wrote that "it is too much to say . . . that The Wizard is a 'Parable on Populism,' but it does share many of the Populist concerns and biases." Like Jensen, Attebery cautioned against an uncritical acceptance of Littlefield; and again like Jensen, he went on to suggest an analogy of his own: "Dorothy, bold, resourceful, leading the men around her toward success, is a juvenile Mary Lease, the Kansas firebrand who told her neighbors to raise less corn and more hell." [\(4\)](#)

The most extensive treatment of the Littlefield thesis is an article by Hugh Rockoff in the *Journal of Political Economy*. Rockoff, who saw in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* "a sophisticated commentary on the political and economic debates of the Populist Era," discovered a surprising number of new analogies. The Deadly Poppy Field, where the Cowardly Lion fell asleep and could not move forward, was the anti-imperialism that threatened to make Bryan forget the main issue of silver (note the Oriental connotation of poppies and opium). Once in the Emerald Palace, Dorothy had to pass through seven halls and climb three flights of stairs; seven and three make seventy-three, which stands for the Crime of '73, the congressional act that eliminated the coinage of silver and that proved to all Populists the collusion between congress and bankers. The Wicked Witch of the East was Grover Cleveland; of the West, William McKinley. The enslavement of the yellow Winkies was "a not very well disguised reference to McKinley's decision to deny immediate independence to the Philippines" after the Spanish-American War. The Wizard himself was Mark Hanna, McKinley's campaign manager,

although Rockoff noted that "this is one of the few points at which the allegory does not work straightforwardly." About half of Rockoff's article consisted of an economic analysis that justified Bryan and Baum's silver stance. [\(5\)](#)

In a recent history of the Populist movement, Gene Clanton wrote that while *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was "a classic parable on the silver crusade," Littlefield had gotten some of it confused. Clanton explained (as had Jensen) that not all pro-Bryan silverites were Populists. A number of reform Democrats shared the Populists' distrust of railroads and bankers, their support for inflation, and so forth, but the Democrats disagreed with the Populists' call for a strong and active government to solve those problems, and in fact they tended to see Populists as dangerous socialist radicals. Clanton suggested that if the Wicked Witch of the East was the forces of industrial capitalism, then Baum's Wicked Witch of the West was Populism itself. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* "mirrored perfectly the middle-ground ideology that was fundamental among those who favored reform yet opposed Populism," wrote Clanton. "Baum's story was an apt metaphor or parable of Progressivism, not Populism." This was hardly the death knell for Littlefield; he had simply confused pro-Bryan, silverite Democrats for pro-Bryan, silverite Populists. [\(6\)](#)

As scholars continued to extend and modify Littlefield's interpretation, laymen discovered it as well. Perhaps the best example was a widely-reprinted essay, first published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988, in which Michael A. Genovese described *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as "the story of the sad collapse of Populism and the issues upon which the movement was based." Genovese's brief analysis was pure Littlefield. But there was one notable (and somewhat disturbing) aspect of Genovese's piece: Littlefield's name was never mentioned. The phrase "according to one scholar" never appeared. Less than a quarter century after his article appeared, Littlefield had entered the public domain. [\(7\)](#)

Several factors help explain Littlefield's popularity. First, he produced an overwhelming number of correspondences, and others have added to the list. One would be hard pressed to find any character, setting, or event in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that does not have a "Populist parable" analogy.

Second, educators discovered Littlefield's usefulness in teaching Populism and related topics. (This was the reason Littlefield, at the time a high school teacher, developed his analysis in the first place; the correspondences between Populism and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he wrote, "furnish a teaching mechanism which is guaranteed to reach any level of student.") [\(8\)](#) The journal *Social Education* suggested using *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* to help secondary school students understand the issues behind Populism, and I myself proposed the Littlefield thesis as a possible lecture topic in an instructor's manual for a popular college-level textbook. [\(9\)](#) Another textbook contained a two-page "special feature" essay explaining *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a Populist allegory (although once again Littlefield's name was not mentioned). [\(10\)](#)

Third, many people in post-Watergate, post-Vietnam America were fascinated to learn that their favorite children's story was something of a subversive document, an anti-establishment fairy tale. Hence in 1988 the *Utne Reader* praised a newspaper article for "expos[ing] Oz as a parable on Populism," a movement that had been critical of "Eastern banks and railroads, which [Populists] charged with oppressing farmers and industrial workers." [\(11\)](#)

By the 1980s, Littlefield's interpretation had become the standard line on *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. [\(12\)](#) Recently, however, one of his basic assertions--that the book was, like the Populist movement itself, a critique of American industrial capitalism--has been challenged by scholars who argue that the book actually celebrated the urban consumer culture of the turn of the century.

The best statement of this revisionist view is William R. Leach's two essays in a new edition of the book. Baum's masterpiece was popular, Leach explained, "because it met--almost perfectly--the particular ethical and emotional needs of people living in a new urban, industrial society." Leach pointed out that the book exalted the opulence and magic of the metropolis. The Emerald City, with its prosperous homes and luxurious stores, resembled nothing as much as it did the "White City" of Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893, which Baum had visited several times. Furthermore, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* reflected Baum's belief in theosophy, a spiritualist/occultist quasi-religious movement that was popular in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, the book emphasized an aspect of theosophy that Norman Vincent Peale would later call "the power of positive thinking": theosophy led to "a new upbeat and positive psychology" that "opposed all kinds of negative thinking--especially fear, worry, and anxiety." It was through this positive thinking, and not through any magic of the Wizard, that Dorothy and her companions (as well as everyone else in Oz) got what they wanted.

"*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was an optimistic secular therapeutic text," wrote Leach. "It helped make people feel at home in America's new industrial economy, and it helped them appreciate and enjoy, without guilt, the new consumer abundance and way of living produced by that economy." Leach concluded that "the book both reflected and helped create a new cultural consciousness--a new way of seeing and being in harmony with the new industrial order." (13)

Leach's new look at Baum directly challenged much of what Littlefield wrote. (14) Furthermore, it was consistent with Baum's background. Before he became a professional writer, Baum worked as a traveling salesman and owned a dry goods store. In 1897, he founded *The Show Window*, the first journal ever devoted to decorating store windows, and in 1900 (the same year as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), he published *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*, the first book on the subject. Furthermore, Baum's involvement in the theater, as everything from actor to producer and writer, taught him to appreciate the artistic lifestyle that only the big cities could offer.

Leach's essays did not necessarily overturn Littlefield, however. Baum might have been "a shopkeeper, a traveling salesman, an actor, a playwright, a windowdresser," (15) but he was also a reform-minded Democrat who supported Bryan's pro-silver campaign in 1896. Given this, Littlefield's thesis still seems plausible.

For years after Baum's death in 1919, the best biography of him was a twenty-five-page sketch written by Martin Gardner for a new edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1957. Gardner wrote just two sentences on Baum's politics: "Aside from marching in a few torchlight parades for William Jennings Bryan, Baum was as inactive in politics as in church affairs [which is to say, pretty inactive]. He consistently voted as a democrat [sic], however, and his sympathies always seem to have been on the side of the laboring classes." Four years later, the first book-length study of Baum appeared. Written by Frank Joslyn Baum (Baum's son, who died during the project) and Russell P. MacFall, the biography did not go beyond Gardner in discussing Baum's politics. (16)

Baum's political affiliation was a big part of Littlefield's argument for seeing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a Populist allegory. Citing Gardner, Littlefield mentioned Baum's support for Democratic candidates and, of course, the torchlight parades for Bryan. "No one who marched in even a few such parades could have been unaffected by Bryan's campaign," Littlefield asserted. (17) If one begins with the assumption that Baum was a Bryan Democrat, it is easy to read a Populist (or at least a pro-silver) message into the book.

But was Baum a Bryan Democrat? In the summer of 1888, Baum moved his family to Aberdeen, South Dakota, where he opened a dry goods store. In January 1890, after the business failed, he bought a local newspaper, renaming it the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. The *Pioneer* was obviously a Republican paper. During the municipal elections that spring, Baum editorialized in support of the Republican candidates; after they won, he wrote that "Aberdeen has redeemed herself . . . [a]fter suffering for nearly a year from the incompetence of a democratic administration." Later that year, Baum urged unity against the growing Independent movement: "We are all members of one great family, the family which saved the Union, the family which stands together as the emblem of prosperity among the nations--Republicanism!" Not only did Baum speak for the Republican party; he spoke against the movement that would soon evolve into the Populists. (18)

It must be admitted that the *Pioneer* had been a Republican paper before Baum bought it, and perhaps he had to maintain its partisan identification in order to maintain its circulation. Furthermore, Baum's *Pioneer*, while clearly Republican, was quite progressive: he wrote in support of women's suffrage, alternative religions, occultism, toleration, and so on. So perhaps Baum was a closet Democrat in Aberdeen, forced to hide his true political feelings.

But that appears not to be the case. In the summer of 1896, the year of the election that would mark what has been called "The Climax of Populism," Baum published a poem in a Chicago newspaper:

When McKinley gets the chair, boys,
There'll be a jollification
Throughout our happy nation
And contentment everywhere!

Great will be our satisfaction
When the "honest money" faction
Seats McKinley in the chair!

No more the ample crops of grain
That in our granaries have lain
Will seek a purchaser in vain
Or be at mercy of the "bull" or "bear";
Our merchants won't be trembling
At the silverites' dissembling
When McKinley gets the chair!

When McKinley gets the chair, boys,
The magic word "protection"
Will banish all dejection
And free the workingman from every care;
We will gain the world's respect
When it knows our coin's "correct"
And McKinley's in the chair!

Hardly the writings of a silverite! Michael Patrick Hearn, the leading scholar on L. Frank Baum, quoted this poem in a recent letter to the *New York Times*. Hearn wrote that he had found "no evidence that Baum's story is in any way a Populist allegory"; Littlefield's argument, Hearn concluded, "has no basis in fact." A month later, Henry M. Littlefield responded to Hearn's letter, agreeing that "there is no basis in fact to consider Baum a supporter of turn-of-the-century Populist ideology." [\(19\)](#)

Thomas A. Bailey once suggested that we set up a computer network to keep track of misinformation that has been corrected--sort of a national clearinghouse for discredited myths. Is it time to move Littlefield to the computer trashpile of misinformation? Given the mounting evidence against it--given that Littlefield himself has admitted that it has "no basis in fact"--should we forget the whole notion of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a parable on Populism? That would be a big mistake. Perhaps we can no longer say that Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* "as an allegory of the silver movement," but we can still read it as an allegory of the silver movement--or, as Henry Littlefield noted just two years ago, "we can bring our own symbolism to it." Recent scholarship might have taken away Baum's intent, but the images are still there, vivid as ever. [\(20\)](#)

And because the images are still there, the Littlefield interpretation (especially as modified by Clanton, Rockoff, and others) remains a useful pedagogical device. Baum gave us a delightful and unforgettable way of illustrating a number of Gilded Age issues, from Populism and the silver movement to the Gilded Age presidency, from the problems of labor to the insurrection in the Philippines.

Thirty years ago, Henry M. Littlefield looked at *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and saw things no one had seen there before. More recently, William R. Leach has shown us another new way of looking at the book, a way that emphasizes a different side of the Gilded Age--the fascination with the city and urban abundance, the rise of a new industrial ethic, and so on. Leach's argument is just as compelling as Littlefield's. "Factual" or not, both are impressive achievements.

But even more impressive is the achievement of L. Frank Baum himself. In the preface to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Baum stated that he wanted to write a new sort of children's story: a modernized, American story, shorn of all the Old World images and motifs. He was tremendously successful in this, producing not only the first real American fairy tale, but one that showed American society and culture in all its wonderful diversity and contradictions, a story so rich it can be, like the book's title character, anything we want it to be--including, if we wish, a parable on Populism. [\(21\)](#)

NOTES

1. Henry M. Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism," *American Quarterly* 16 (1964): 47-58 (quotation on 54); L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago, 1900).
2. Littlefield, "Parable on Populism," 50, 58.
3. Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago, 1971), 282-83.
4. Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington, 1980), 86-87.
5. Hugh Rockoff, "The 'Wizard of Oz' as a Monetary Allegory," *Journal of Political Economy* 98 (1990): 739, 751.
6. Gene Clanton, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890-1900* (Boston, 1991), 149-50. Fred Erisman, "L. Frank Baum and the Progressive Dilemma," *American Quarterly* 20 (1968): 616-23, made a similar point, but outside the context of Littlefield's analogies.
7. *Los Angeles Times*, 19 March 1988.
8. Littlefield, "Parable on Populism," 58. For a brief discussion of how he came to write the essay, see Henry M. Littlefield, "The Wizard of Allegory," *Baum Bugle* 36 (Spring 1992):24-25. The Baum Bugle is published by the International Wizard of Oz Club.
9. David W. Van Cleef and Charles W. Funkhouser, "Inquiry, 'Oz,' and Populism," *Social Education* 51 (1987): 282-83; Thomas S. Morgan and David B. Parker, *Instructor's Manual and Test Bank to Accompany America: A Narrative History*, Second Edition, by George B. Tindall (New York, 1988), 213.
10. Robert A. Divine et al., *America: Past and Present* (Glenview, Ill., 1984), 594-95. The essay was retained in later editions of the textbook; the third edition was published in 1991. For other examples of educators and the Littlefield thesis, see Michael Gessel, "Tale of a Parable," *Baum Bugle* 36 (Spring 1992): 19-23.
11. Michael Dregni, "The Politics of Oz," *Utne Reader* 28 (July/August 1988): 32-33. The newspaper cited was *In These Times*, 18 Feb. 1987.
12. There have been other interpretations of the book--scholars have read it from psychoanalytical, feminist,

theological/philosophical, mythological, and Marxist perspectives, among others----but Littlefield's was easily the best known and most widely accepted of the bunch.

13. William R. Leach, "The Clown from Syracuse: The Life and Times of L. Frank Baum," in L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Belmont, Calif., 1991), 2; Leach, "A Trickster's Tale: L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*," in *ibid.*, 168, 174. Stuart Culver discussed Baum's book as a reflection of the advertising that accompanied the consumer culture. Culver, "What Manikins Want: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows," *Representations* 21 (1988): 97-116.

14. One could try to reconcile the differences by suggesting that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was not so much about the Populists themselves as it was about the culture that gave rise to the Populists. Midwestern farmers were well aware of the consumer paradise Leach described (through the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog, for example); perhaps their inability to partake more fully in that paradise was one of the reasons for the agrarian discontent that led to the Populists. But this oversimplifies Littlefield's argument, which was about silver and gold, William Jennings Bryan and dehumanized factory workers, not just "agrarian discontent." I appreciate Robert C. McMath, Jr.'s and James Cassidy's helpful comments on this point.

15. Leach, "Clown from Syracuse," 3.

16. Martin Gardner, "The Royal Historian of Oz," in Gardner and Russel B. Nye, *The Wizard of Oz and Who He Was* (East Lansing, Mich., 1957), 29; Frank Joslyn Baum and Russell P. MacFall, *To Please a Child: A Biography of L. Frank Baum, Royal Historian of Oz* (Chicago, 1961), 85, 124. ("The Royal Historian of Oz" is a title L. Frank Baum himself had used.) Michael Patrick Hearn is preparing a new biography of Baum; for now, the most reliable source of information is Hearn, ed., *The Annotated Wizard of Oz* (New York, 1973).

17. Littlefield, "Parable on Populism," 49.

18. *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, 12 April 1890, 19 April 1890, 18 Oct. 1890. For more on Baum's editorship and political affiliation, see Nancy Tystad Koupal, "The Wonderful Wizard of the West: L. Frank Baum in South Dakota, 1888-91," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (1989): 207-8.

19. Robert F. Durden, *The Climax of Populism: The Election of 1896* (Lexington, 1965); *Chicago Times Herald*, 12 July 1896, quoted in *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 1991; *New York Times*, 7 Feb. 1992.

20. Thomas A. Bailey, "The Mythmakers of American History," *Journal of American History* 55 (1968): 18; Divine et al., *America*, 594; Littlefield, "The Wizard of Allegory," 25.

21. When describing characters and settings that readers have never encountered before, writers (and especially writers of fantasy) might naturally use familiar imagery to help the reader along. This could explain why *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is richer and more vivid than Baum's later books in the series (he wrote 13 others, from *The Marvelous Land of Oz* to *Glinda of Oz*): after that original volume, the characters and settings were no longer unknown--from the second book on, readers had encountered them before--and so Baum had less reason to use American images as the basis for his descriptions. And as good as some of those later books are, an Ozian Oz(described on its own terms) was nowhere near as fascinating as an American Oz.



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The Wizard of Oz, published in 1900, was written by L. Frank Baum. Baum had been a reporter and editor at newspapers in Chicago and South Dakota, where he had been in a position to observe the Populist agitation for agrarian reform. The Populists felt they were getting screwed by eastern capitalists who controlled the gold supply, among other things. One of their principal demands was for the free coinage of silver, which would make for "easy money." Supposedly this was represented in The Wizard of Oz by Dorothy's silver shoes (they only became ruby slippers in the movie version). For an entertaining discussion of the subject, see "The Rise and Fall of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz as a Parable on Populism," by David B. Parker.