

William McKinley and His America, Revised Edition. By H. Wayne Morgan. (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003. vii, 488 pp. Hardcover, \$55.00, ISBN 0-87338-765-1.)

History has not been kind to presidents elected from Ohio. The Buckeye State's native sons are remembered as less-than-stellar chief executives, responsible for sins ranging from scandal to lechery, or as colorless party hacks who left little impact on the nation. William McKinley has often fallen into this latter category, portrayed as an indecisive and dull-witted puppet of big business. Four decades ago, H. Wayne Morgan challenged these generalizations with the publication of *William McKinley and His America*. What emerged was a refreshingly different McKinley: independent, strong-willed, and sympathetic to the working masses. Fresh on the heels of the centennial of McKinley's presidency, Kent State University Press has released Morgan's revised and expanded biography of America's twenty-fifth commander-in-chief.

Born in 1843 in Niles, McKinley grew up in small-town Poland, Ohio, imbibing the core values that would shape his life including sobriety, pragmatism, and a strong work ethic. When the Civil War began, McKinley enlisted in the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment, a unit destined to produce two future presidents. Unlike his commander Rutherford B. Hayes, who was wounded numerous times, McKinley served behind the lines as a commissary sergeant. But Morgan, drawing on a variety of sources that include McKinley's wartime diary, opines that he performed his duties with unusual diligence, and often in the face of personal danger, as when he drove a chuck wagon into the heat of battle at Antietam, supplying hot food and coffee to his famished comrades. Cited for bravery and brevetted as a major, McKinley used his fame to establish a law practice in Canton and win election to Congress in 1876.

Known to contemporaries as "The Napoleon of Protection," Representative McKinley was an unabashed champion of high tariffs. Morgan argues convincingly that, rather than acting out of allegiance to big business, McKinley sincerely believed that America's youthful industrial system was unready to face unstifled foreign competition, and that tariffs protected the wages of those workers who formed his political base in the steel-rich Tuscarawas Valley. His high point as a legislator came with the notorious McKinley Tariff of 1890, which contained the highest rates to that time. Common historical assessments have either portrayed the tariff as a pyrrhic victory for McKinley, because its unpopularity led to his defeat for reelection later in the year, or as the most important victory in his career, since it caught the eye of political kingmaker Marcus Hanna. But Morgan points out that McKinley's defeat in 1890 was

the result of Democratic gerrymandering, and that what actually attracted the industrialist to McKinley was the young attorney's pro bono defense of miners charged with violence in a strike against one of Hanna's mines, fourteen years prior to enactment of the tariff.

Hanna helped McKinley win Ohio's governorship in 1891, positioning "The Major" for a future presidential bid. During his four years in Columbus, McKinley grappled with fiscal crises, an inequitable tax system, and, after the Panic of 1893, working-class discontent. Morgan writes that all concerned knew that his sympathies lay against the corporations (123), and despite the weakness of the governor's office, McKinley ushered through tax increases on railroads and other big businesses. The Governor also dealt gracefully with Coxey's Army in 1894 and reinforced his reputation as a champion of workers when he supplied food to starving Hocking Valley miners and their families in 1895. Unfortunately, Morgan's account of the gubernatorial years is disappointing, dealing mostly with McKinley's election campaigns, his growing presidential boom, and a personal financial crisis which nearly ended his political career; substantive legislative matters are treated rather sketchily.

Morgan gives a thorough account of the colorful 1896 election campaign and the significant role played by Hanna. Mindful of McKinley's reluctance to leave his frail wife, Ida, for long periods of time, and realistic about his friend's inability to beat William Jennings Bryan at stump speaking, Hanna instead crafted a front porch campaign. Sound money candidate McKinley spoke daily to trainloads of Republicans brought into Canton, hammering away at Bryan and free silver, while Hanna transmitted the speeches via the wire services to newspapers throughout the country. Although Morgan concedes that Bryan's mistakes were just as responsible for his defeat as was McKinley's organization (188), the GOP victory ushered in a nearly-four-decade-long era of Republican dominance, placing McKinley in a political class with Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt.

Although he was a nationalist concerned with tariff and monetary policy, foreign affairs dominated McKinley's administration. Morgan portrays the President as both determined in his promotion of American interests in China, and forceful in his advocacy of the annexation of Hawaii, which he felt was a natural extension of manifest destiny. But it is the Spanish-American War for which McKinley is best remembered, and Morgan paints him in a positive light: initially reluctant to shed blood, yet decisive when all peaceful options had disappeared. The author is perhaps a bit too generous, however, in failing to hold McKinley responsible for America's horrendous lack of

preparation for war. Although McKinley has often been criticized for waffling on annexation of the Philippines, Morgan portrays this seeming indecision as thoughtful contemplation of the visions of empire that dazzled less sober men (314). After weighing the pros and cons, McKinley saw the Philippine question as part of the country's movement to world status (314), and decided upon a complete takeover.

In a final assessment of McKinley, Morgan writes that even those who disagree with his policies and decisions see him as an active, responsible, informed participant in charge of decision making (473), and throughout the book he provides overwhelming documentation to support this conclusion. A cynic might find Morgan's McKinley a bit too good to be true – scrupulously honest, self-effacing, clean-living, and a devoted son and husband. Much the same can be said for his portrayal of Hanna, who comes off as an idealist who, with pluck and political astuteness, outwits the old guard GOP bosses to win the 1896 nomination for his friend. But these are minor criticisms. With masterful writing skills, Morgan distills esoteric and potentially boring topics such as tariff reform and foreign policy into fascinating narratives. The author has updated the book to reflect an array of secondary material published since 1963, which he includes in a bibliographical essay. Like its predecessor, the revised edition of *William McKinley and His America* is a welcome addition to Gilded Age historiography.

Arthur E. DeMatteo
Assistant Professor
Glenville State College