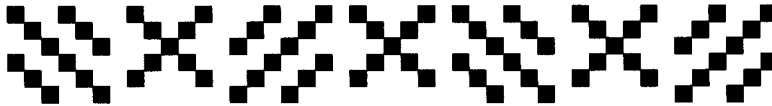


The Papers of Eugene V. Debs:
A Review Essay

Errol Wayne Stevens*



The Papers of Eugene V. Debs, 1834-1945: A Guide to the Microfilm Edition. Edited by J. Robert Constantine; associate editor, Gail Malmgreen. (New York: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1983. Pp. vii, 163. Notes, selected bibliography, indexes. Paperbound, \$25.00.)

Born in Terre Haute in 1855, Eugene Victor Debs is one of Indiana's best known, but least appreciated, native sons. Like his fellow Terre Hautean, Theodore Dreiser, Debs the socialist has been something of an embarrassment to many Hoosiers, but as he becomes more and more of a historical figure and less of a living reality—he died nearly sixty years ago—this attitude seems to be on the wane. With the publication of Nick Salvatore's Bancroft-prize-winning biography in 1982 and the appearance of the microfilm edition of *The Papers of Eugene V. Debs* the following year, a revival of interest in the Indiana socialist appears to be underway.

The son of Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Bettrich Debs, both immigrants from the Alsace, Gene left school at the age of fourteen to work on the railroads, first as a painter and later as a fireman. Even after his brief career on the rails—it lasted only five years—he remained active in the Vigo Lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, rising rapidly to become national secretary and editor of its magazine.

Debs began his career as a conservative trade unionist, taking a dim view of strikes and cultivating worker-management co-

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EUGENE V. DEBS, AGED FOURTEEN, ON HIS FIRST JOB AS A PAINTER FOR THE TERRE HAUTE AND INDIANAPOLIS RAILROAD

Courtesy Eugene V. Debs Foundation, Terre Haute, Indiana.

operation. Debs's role model during these years was William Riley McKeen, a banker and owner of the Terre Haute and Indianapolis Railroad. In 1885 Debs married Katherine Metzger, the stepdaughter of a respectable local druggist, and built her a fine home that later attracted much criticism from opponents both within and outside the socialist movement. For a time Debs was a promising Democratic politician, winning two terms as Terre Haute city clerk and one term in the state legislature. His experience in that august body, where the bills he introduced on railroad labor reform were mercilessly watered down in the Senate, left him with a jaundiced view of politics.

Unlike most men Debs became more radical as he grew older. By the late 1880s he had dropped his opposition to strikes and had come to regard the railroad brotherhoods as ineffective craft unions frequently more at odds with one another than with their employers. In 1892 he resigned as secretary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and helped form the American Railway Union, which ignored craft lines and united all railroad workers into one organization. The new union was very successful, recruiting 150,000 members in less than a year and defeating James

J. Hill's powerful Great Northern Railroad in an eighteen-day strike. These successes proved only temporary. In 1894 the union made the fateful decision to boycott Pullman cars in support of a strike of the company's workers at Pullman, Illinois. The union was crushed in the face of an overwhelming combination of corporate opposition, federal troops, and court injunctions.

The Pullman strike was a turning point in Debs's life. He was convicted of defying a federal injunction that forbade his participation in all strike activities and spent six months in the Woodstock, Illinois, jail. This gave him time to reflect on the inequities of the capitalist system. A parade of visitors came to see the imprisoned union leader. Many were prominent socialists such as Victor Berger of Milwaukee, Thomas J. Morgan of Chicago, and Keir Hardie of Scotland. He read many books during this period and later claimed to have been deeply influenced by Karl Kautsky, the German popularizer of Karl Marx. A year after his release Debs publicly announced his conversion to socialism. "The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism," he wrote in the January 1, 1897, issue of the *Railway Times*. "I am for Socialism because I am for humanity."

Debs's career as a socialist is well known. Five times he was the Socialist party's presidential candidate. In 1912 he won 6 percent of the total vote, the highest ever given a Socialist candidate. In 1920 he campaigned from behind the walls of the Atlanta penitentiary and won nearly a million votes. He remained a champion of industrial unionism throughout his career and, despite his decision to embrace a creed which most of them rejected, remained very popular among rank-and-file workers.

In his famous Canton, Ohio, speech in June, 1918, Debs condemned World War I as a class war fought for the benefit of the capitalists at the expense of the workers. This was little different from what he had said in previous speeches, but on this occasion the federal government deemed his remarks sufficiently disloyal to warrant prosecution under the Espionage Act. Debs was convicted and spent two and a half years behind bars—most of them in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. During his trial Debs repeated his famous remark: "While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." These words may sound maudlin and melodramatic to the modern ear, but they were sincere. The socialist became a popular figure among both prisoners and prison guards. Inmates frequently sought his advice and help. Prison officials often turned to Debs to assist in counseling difficult prisoners. Outside the walls supporters launched a nationwide campaign to seek his release, but it was not until Warren G. Harding assumed the presidency that the socialist received a pardon.

Debs spent his last years as the head of a party torn apart by internal dissension and scorned by a hostile public. Although he remained active until nearly the end, his magic had begun to fade, and he spoke to dwindling audiences. He died at Lindlahr Sanitarium outside of Chicago on October 20, 1926.

Debs's biographers have treated him well, portraying the socialist leader as a heroic figure motivated almost solely by a desire to improve the lot of those crushed down by the emerging capitalist-industrialist society. It is difficult not to conclude from their works that Debs was indeed a compassionate man with a profound and genuine concern for his fellow human beings. James Whitcomb Riley, a close friend and drinking companion, captured this aspect of his personality in his poem "Regardin' Terry Hut":

And there's 'Gene Debs—a man 'at stands
And jes' holds out in his two hands
As warm a heart as ever beat
Betwixt here and the Jedgegment Seat!

The earliest biographies, such as David Karsner's *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters* (1919) and McAlister Coleman's *Eugene V. Debs: A Man Unafraid* (1930), are unabashed hagiographies. Even Ray Ginger's 1949 volume, *The Bending Cross*, a fine book long considered the standard biography, is uncritically admiring. Only very recently have writers begun to treat Debs as anything like a flesh-and-blood human being. While Bernard J. Brommel's *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (1978) is as adoring as most previous works, it brings to light for the first time Debs's affair with Mabel Curry, the wife of an Indiana State University professor. David A. Corbin's article "Betrayal in the West Virginia Coal Fields: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Party of America, 1912-1914," which appeared in the *Journal of American History* in 1978, broke sharply with the literature on Debs by suggesting that he was not such a nice guy after all. Corbin accuses the socialist of betraying rank-and-file coal miners in the interests of maintaining good relations with the United Mine Workers union hierarchy. The most recent, and best, biography of Debs is Nick Salvatore's *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982). Although certainly an admiring biographer, Salvatore deals perceptively with some of the less attractive aspects of the socialist's life and character. These include his need for the constant support and unquestioned loyalty of those near him, his inability to confront friends on political issues, and his gradually cooling relationship with his wife. Salvatore's Debs is

a warm and compassionate man, but he is also a far more complex and interesting human being than has been seen before.

The latest entry into Debs scholarship is the microfilm edition of *The Papers of Eugene V. Debs, 1834-1945*, edited by J. Robert Constantine and Gail Malmgreen and published by the Microfilming Corporation of America. This collection should play an important role in the continuing reevaluation of the life and career of this American socialist leader. The collection is the product of the Debs Papers Project which began in 1979 and was completed with the assistance of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Constantine, a professor of history at Indiana State University, is currently at work on a three-volume edition of selected Debs correspondence.

The microfilm collection, consisting of twenty-three reels, is divided into three series: correspondence, published writings and speeches, and scrapbooks. A useful guide containing a chronology of Debs's life, a biographical sketch, select bibliography, index, and checklist accompanies the collection.

A disappointingly small number of reels, only five, make up the correspondence in Series I. This is certainly not the fault of Constantine and Malmgreen who conducted an exhaustive nationwide search to locate Debs's correspondence. It is rather a testimony to the difficulty of locating materials relating to even major figures of the American left. The editors further point out that the "volume of surviving correspondence dating from the early years of Debs' career is thin compared to that of his later years" (p. 39). Indeed it is. Reel one runs from 1834 to 1914. Even so, the collected correspondence is of unquestioned value not only in understanding Debs's life but also for studies of American radicalism in general. A cursory check in the index of David A. Shannon's *The Socialist Party of America* (1955) reveals that out of a sample of sixty-six names, forty-one showed up as correspondents in the Debs collection.

The editors were obviously not under pressure to be selective in including letters. They indicate that no "known correspondence to or from any member of the Debs family has been excluded from this microfilm edition" (p. 40). The very large number of letters to and from Theodore Debs is worthy of comment. Theodore acted as his brother's secretary, confidant, and alter ego. His letters, according to the editors, "should be considered Eugene's correspondence" (p. 39). Theodore has been badly slighted by historians, particularly by Ginger. Salvatore is more sensitive in his exploration of the relationship between the two brothers, but

Theodore remains a neglected figure in the history of American radicalism.

Each document in Series I is accompanied by a target card which gives the name of correspondent (a boon to those with bad luck at deciphering signatures) as well as the location of the original. At the end of this series, on reel five, is a collection of thirty-two reminiscences about Debs by men and women, both prominent and not so prominent, who knew him. The guide to the collection includes an index by correspondent and cross referencing where possible by geographic location.

Series II (reels six to eight) consists of Debs's published writings and speeches. The editors claim that this series "comprises the largest collection of Debs' published writings . . . ever assembled" (p. 46). Debs was an accomplished and prolific journalist, and his writings appeared in many periodicals. Constantine and Malmgreen scanned the entire runs (when available) of twenty-two publications that frequently carried Debs material. This series also includes items from scrapbooks, clipping files, and other sources. In addition to published materials Series II includes some previously unpublished speeches. Among these are verbatim notes of speeches taken by government agents who shadowed Debs's public appearances during the war. The editors obtained these through the Freedom of Information Act. As in the correspondence series, a target card accompanies each item and includes title, place, and date of publication. Unfortunately, the target card does not include the entire name of the publication, only an abbreviation. To find the name of the periodical one must look in the guide, an irritating inconvenience. The guide includes a checklist, arranged alphabetically, of the titles of all published articles and all speeches in Series II.

Series III, which makes up the bulk of the collection (thirteen reels or about 62 percent of the total), consists of scrapbooks and clippings which Eugene and Theodore Debs compiled over the years. This material is reproduced from microfilm owned by the Tamiment Library at New York University. It is unfortunate that the largest part of the collection is the least satisfactory. The material is poorly organized, and much of it is of questionable value. Even so, important information may lie buried in these scrapbooks and clippings: The reel that this reviewer sampled, reel twelve, contained correspondence relating to Debs's second imprisonment. There are no target cards and no index for this series.

The Papers of Eugene V. Debs joins a growing body of source materials on the American left already microfilmed and widely available to researchers. Scholars will use this collection for a

variety of purposes. In this reviewer's mind one of the most pressing needs at the moment is a well-written biography aimed at a general rather than an academic audience. Debs, once one of the most well-known and admired men of his time, is fast fading from the popular consciousness. Americans need to be reminded of his importance. Salvatore's new biography is excellent, but it is not in the strict sense a personal biography. It is rather a "social biography" which admirably places Debs within the broad context of his time and place. But however much Debs was a product of Terre Haute, he was in no way a typical Terre Hautean. A new biography is needed, one which will help to explain more fully the strengths and weaknesses that made Debs an exceptional man.