
Readers of God's Government Begun are not likely to be left with the feeling that Thomas D. Hamm, Earlham College's distinguished church historian, has engaged them in a threshing of old straw. The story he tells of the Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform has never been told before; surprisingly, few of even the most detailed accounts of antebellum reform take note of it. Yet, as this book demonstrates, the organization and its personnel deserve the intensive research Hamm devoted to them.

Founded in 1842 by a small, inspired group of radical reformers, the society aimed to form ideal communities that would provide models for the reconstitution of an America that from their point of view had gone awry. By the 1830s misgivings about the course of American development had produced an array of reform movements designed to remove the ills and evils that beset society and thereby promote human welfare and, not incidentally, also render the nation more pleasing in the sight of God. Among the most dedicated of these reformers were the founders of the Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform.

The society proceeded to establish eight communities designed to give form and force to their renovating principles. Four of these were in Indiana: Union Home in Randolph County, West Grove or Fraternal Home in Jay County, Kriseen in Marshall County, and Grand Prairie in Warren County. Although all had disappeared by the end of 1846, their short life does not mean that they and the earnest men and women who created them left nothing of value to posterity and are deserving of their long obscurity.

Their record, brief though it is, reminds us that not all Americans welcomed the highly competitive, atomistic economy and society that characterized Jacksonian America and to some extent persists today. The founders of the society, it is instructive to note, were not foreign-born revolutionaries nor adherents to alien ideologies. Their family roots as well as their ideas were at least as old as the republic.

Some of the strongest critics of the emergent American culture always were to be found among Quakers and by the 1830s and 1840s among the Hicksite Friends. Not surprisingly, Friends, together with some New England evangelicals, provided the society with its leaders and members and most of its energy and principles. The founders were extreme indeed and indiscriminate in their questioning of prevailing values and practices. They gave respectful heed to most of the reforms, great and small, that in those years were entertained by the speculative.
The society's founders were closely associated with the most radical fringes of abolitionism—not even William Lloyd Garrison outdid them in antislavery zeal. As nonresistants, they renounced coercive earthly government in all its manifestations, relying instead on their understanding of the Government of God. Retreating from the emergent competitive capitalism of their day, they proposed an economy based on agricultural cooperation.

Obviously, their aims in most respects ran counter to the forces that shaped the modern world, and thus the society's efforts were doomed. Although their notions of possibility were different from those of contemporary Americans, and although their solutions sometimes seem strange, the record of their lives nevertheless offers fresh perspective on the present as well as on the past and is therefore fully worthy of attention.

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As the Socialist Party of America's founder, organizational leader, perennial presidential candidate, and principal spokesperson, Eugene V. Debs was American socialism's most public face and gifted voice in the early twentieth century. Born and raised in Terre Haute, Debs came of age as the conflict between labor and capital was intensifying and vast concentrations of economic power were calling into question the democratic promise of the American experiment. He served in the local Democratic party and his town's lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen as a young man, counseling the harmony of labor and capital. Yet by the early 1890s he had broken with the narrow, conservative craft union whose journal he edited and formed an industrially organized, rival federation of railroad workers known as the American Railway Union (ARU). In 1894, he threw his support behind the boycott of Pullman cars in the most celebrated sympathy strike of the nineteenth century. Debs and his allies lost—the American Federation of Labor did not join the boycott, the ARU was destroyed, Pullman workers went down to painful defeat, and Debs landed in jail for violating a federal court injunction protecting the company. By the end of the century, Debs had emerged as the leading figure in the growing American socialist movement.

*Gentle Rebel* is a single-volume compilation of Debs's correspondence. It is a condensation of the impressive three-volume *Let-