



Ignatius Donnelly and the Apocalyptic Style

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"WE MEET in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin." So an-

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nounced Ignatius Donnelly to the thousands of men and women who crowded into Exposition Music Hall in St. Louis on February 22, 1892. They had traveled to St. Louis to found the People's party — a new political party that would address itself to the urgent needs of farmers, laboring men, and reformers, who by the end of the nineteenth century had grown increasingly alienated and frustrated. They protested against the falling prices of the farmer's produce, the long, hard hours of the industrial laborer, the unprecedented, teeming growth of the cities, and the continual influx of immigrants — in short,

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all the forces of the Gilded Age which seemed to threaten the foundations of American society. Donnelly continued:

The people are demoralized. . . . A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents and is taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of absolute despotism.

Like an evangelical preacher, Donnelly held out before his audience on the one hand the prospect of apocalypse, "the destruction of civilization," and on the other, should the People's party come to power, "liberty, prosperity and justice."¹

It was Donnelly's finest moment. His address, which was the preamble to the People's party platform and which became known as the "Populist Manifesto," was cheered enthusiastically. To Donnelly it seemed that St. Louis represented the beginning of the fruition of his dreams for himself and the nation. It was as if the *essence* of his life's work — his idealistic plans for

Nininger, a new community in southern Minnesota, his politics of protest, his scientific investigations, his fiction, and even his Shakespearean researches might finally be realized. The key to understanding Donnelly, and by extension an important aspect of the Populist movement, is to see his politics and creative endeavors as essentially similar responses of a very rigid though extraordinarily imaginative mind to social change. His participation in post-Civil War reform campaigns was not simply the result of his pugnacious nature and his championing of the underdog, as John D. Hicks suggests. Nor can Donnelly's fierce independence and inventive whirlwinds be explained satisfactorily, as Martin Ridge tries to do, by citing Donnelly's rebellious spirit "channeled into a drive for success and recognition."²

On the contrary, Donnelly's Populism was rooted squarely in the Jacksonian conception of the world that he had adopted before 1860. While the changing conditions of a new industrial order provided the setting for his politics and literature, and gave vehemence to the apocalyptic style he developed to vent his outrage and fears, Donnelly nonetheless carried forward, as it were, a static world view combining a political model of redemption through conversion, an ideal of a natural, agrarian-based economy in which all men could carve out independent fortunes, and an innate optimism that the future would witness the steady growth of the American nation.³

Donnelly and the Populists failed, of course, because essentially the People's party tried to impose an outdated model of politics and society on the country. Their dreams — of a new transpolitical moral order, of a renewed sense of power and prestige, and, most of all, of a rural republic in which the "true producers," farmers, mechanics, and small entrepreneurs, controlled their own destinies — really had no chance. The Populists opposed pluralist democracy and the two-party political system and offered in its place a counterrevolutionary, pseudo-religious alternative. Their millenarian vision, as Richard Jensen writes, "was derived from the image of a united America, in which all elements of society cooperated in Christian harmony." Rejecting interest-group politics, patronage, bargaining, and party loyalty, Populists like Donnelly saw politics as a struggle against evil resulting in eventual cataclysm or the millennium. If political bosses argued, "Let me make the deals and I care not who makes the ideals," political moralists, whose evangelical persuasion emphasized correct conduct and the conversion of others, believed there could be no compromise with sin, or as Jensen puts it, "a world of Republicans and Democrats, of elections and coalitions, of successes and defeats."⁴ The People's party failed in fact because it opposed the economic, social, and intellectual currents in which the majority of a growing urban and industrial population had a stake. The *New*

¹John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party*, 436 (Minneapolis, 1931). For the tumultuous reaction to Donnelly's address in St. Louis, see p. 228.

²John D. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:80-133 (June-September, 1921); Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly*, 401 (Chicago, 1962). Other important essays on Donnelly include J. Wayne Baker's "Populist Themes in the Fiction of Ignatius Donnelly," in *American Studies*, 14:65-84 (Fall, 1973), which suggests that Donnelly was a frustrated capitalist and a disappointed office seeker, and Frederic C. Jaher's chapter on Donnelly's apocalyptic visions in his *Doubters and Dissenters: Cataclysmic Thought in America, 1885-1918*, 96-123 (New York, 1964). In addition, Norman Pollack has written an essay defending Donnelly against Oscar Handlin's and Richard Hofstadter's charges of antisemitism. See Norman Pollack, "Ignatius Donnelly on Human Rights: A Study of Two Novels," in *Mid-America*, 47:99-112 (April, 1965); Oscar Handlin, "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century," in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 40:335-340 (June, 1951); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, 67-70, 79 (New York, 1955).

³Donnelly belonged to a generation of Gilded Age reformers whose roots go back to the Jacksonian era. As John L. Thomas has shown for Henry George, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and Edward Bellamy — all of whom like Donnelly were born before industrialization began to alter the American landscape — utopian "wish-pictures" of a rural paradise sustained their visions and molded their prescriptions for reform. See John L. Thomas, "Utopia for an Urban Age," in *Perspectives in American History*, 6:135-163 (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

⁴Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896*, p. 189, 200 (Chicago, 1971). See also Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics 1850-1900*, 69-91 (New York, 1970).

York Times perhaps overstated its case when it called the St. Louis platform “a very comic document,” but it was correct when it wrote that “since the Nation . . . is so clearly the happiest and most prosperous country in the world . . . it is evident that a third party in this melancholy frame of mind cannot exert a great influence.”⁵

DONNELLY, the son of Irish Catholic immigrants, was born in Philadelphia in 1831. He grew up with a sense of crisis and conflict, a witness of that city’s early growth, its riots, and its racial turmoil. It was, nevertheless, an era which he felt held great promise for himself and the country. His chief interests as a young man were poetry and politics. When he was only nineteen he published his first book, *The Mourner’s Vision*, which, despite its heavy romantic sentimentality and preoccupation with death, revealed the young Donnelly’s desire to make an imprint on the world and his fascination with the future. Towards the end of the poem, he wrote, anticipating a lifetime of apocalyptic concerns: “Mark the Aztecs’ fate, / Struggling ignobly, — hopeless, helpless slaves. — / While o’er their cowering souls the storm of ruin raves.” But, with Walt Whitman, Donnelly then exclaimed, “My own land, / Pride of my heart, I gaze on thee and sing.”⁶ Upon graduation from high school, with an eye towards a political career, he became a clerk in the office of a rising young Philadelphia lawyer and also joined the Democratic party. Within a few years, however, after unsuccessfully running as a Democrat for the Pennsylvania state legislature, Donnelly, always more romantic than practical, decided that only in the West could he rise to prominence as quickly as he desired.

In 1856 Donnelly and his wife, Kate, moved to Minnesota. Almost upon his arrival he entered into a promotional scheme with John Nininger to establish a new town called Nininger near the junction of the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers. The model for Donnelly’s future utopian communities in his populist novels, *Caesar’s Column* and *The Golden Bottle*, Nininger would, Donnelly promised prospective investors, be an enterprise “for mutual benefit, founded on no selfish policy, but wide enough to enrich without distinction, all it may include.”⁷ The idea was to attract settlers to Minnesota — “the finest lands the sun of heaven ever smiled upon” — and then sell them lots in the new town. Donnelly proposed that “the very men who were fed on public soup in our great cities” should come to Minnesota where “at home among people like themselves . . . they [would be] known and respected according to their deserts.” Moreover, he guaranteed that the free citizens of Nininger would “find no envy, no jealousy, [and] no malignant competition” in their new home.⁸ But in 1857 Donnelly’s optative mood dissipated when the panic of that year dried up investment capital, forcing him to abandon his hope of settling the West and becom-

ing rich in the process. Nevertheless, he never gave up his dream of an America which might be, as he wrote of Nininger, “wide enough to enrich without distinction, all it may include.”

Although he had been a Democrat in Philadelphia, in Minnesota Donnelly joined the new Republican party. He was attracted to the moral fervor of the Republicans’ opposition to the extension of slavery and to their emphasis on the dignity of free labor. With the Republicans, Donnelly envisioned a united, free, and egalitarian nation populated by prosperous small businessmen, independent, self-supporting farmers, and skilled mechanics, all working in relative harmony. This almost utopian prescription for the nation’s future, which Eric Foner calls an ideology of free soil, free labor, and free men, was one Donnelly espoused until his death at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the years before the Civil War it was a powerful image that captured the North’s imagination and suited the interests and the temperament of men on the make such as Ignatius Donnelly.⁹

In 1858 Donnelly ran for the Minnesota State Senate. Although he lost, he told his supporters:

The Republican party is one of sentiment and principle, not of spoil and plunder. We have joined it, not for selfish aims of personal advancement, but in pursuance of our convictions that it embodies in itself the great moral and political advancement of the day — that movement which points to complete fulfillment of the purposes which made us a distinct nation. If, then, we have failed to accomplish political success, let us not be cast down, but, comforted by the assurance that we have done our best, gird up our loins once more, and prepare ourselves again to fight the good fight.¹⁰

The campaign for state senator marked the beginning of Donnelly’s career in the politics of morality. An Irish Catholic, he was an anomaly among evangelical politi-

⁵*New York Times*, February 25, 1892, p. 4.

⁶Ignatius Donnelly, *The Mourner’s Vision*, 72, 80 (Philadelphia, 1850).

⁷Ignatius Donnelly, *Statement of the Basis of the Organization of the City of Nininger, Minnesota*, 10 (Philadelphia, 1856).

⁸Ignatius Donnelly, *Nininger City: A Pamphlet*, 18, 19 (Philadelphia, 1856); “Nininger City,” in *Emigrant Aid Journal* (Nininger), December 1, 1856, p. 1.

⁹Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men. The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

¹⁰Everett W. Fish, *Donnelliana: An Appendix to “Caesar’s Column,”* part 1, p. 29 (Chicago, 1892). Divided into two parts, *Donnelliana* is both a Populist campaign biography of Donnelly and a selection of “excerpts from [his] wit, wisdom, poetry, and eloquence.”

cians who emphasized moral behavior and sought to make the party an agency of conversion. But the irony was not lost to Donnelly. Reviewing the political history of almost a half century, he wrote in 1889, "The Dem. party had possession of the Irish race and they made them, (the most oppressed of the white races), the defenders of human slavery. . . . The Irish race owes the Dem. party a great debt of hatred." Also unlike most Catholics, Donnelly despised alcohol, exclaiming that intemperance was "deadlier than death." By 1859 he was elected lieutenant governor of Minnesota. In the long run, however, for Donnelly and those others who could not, or would not, make the post-Civil War transition to modern, industrialized, business-oriented America, "the good fight" would mean frustration, defeat, and despair.¹¹

In 1862, after serving two terms as lieutenant governor, Donnelly ran successfully for Congress. For the next six years he was Minnesota's Republican representative in the House. Only thirty-one when he first entered Congress, Donnelly possessed a grandiloquent oratorical style that quickly distinguished him as a proponent of Republican nationalism. He delivered his maiden address in February, 1864, on the value of foreign immigration. He told the House that "If our age marks a new era in the development of the human race," and the apocalyptic Donnelly was sure that it did, "it is to be found . . . in its opening to all men of all races and colors equal opportunities for advancement; in its scattering over new and virgin lands the pent-up and oppressed populations of the elder nations." This he maintained was the "high mission" of any political party which hoped to rule the country.¹²

Martin Ridge contrasts the optimism Donnelly displayed in his congressional career, as well as his lobbying on the behalf of the railroads, with his later career as a profound pessimist and a Populist and concludes, therefore, that he was driven by failure into third party politics.¹³ It is true that Donnelly changed his position notably and dramatically on the question of immigration and the railroads, but what he did not change was his basic conception of a prosperous, egalitarian, and agrarian America. And in the 1860s increased immigration and railroad construction were the means to that end. In 1892, when Donnelly advocated the curtailment of im-

migration and the nationalization of the railroads to bring about his dream of a renovated Jacksonian America, he did so with a sense of consistency. What had changed in the interim was not Donnelly but the United States and the Republican party.

After the Civil War Donnelly joined the Radical Republicans in Congress. He was particularly active in defending the freed slaves. Characteristic of his concerns as a Republican, but also of his later Populist inclinations, was his amendment to enlarge the powers of the Freedmen's Bureau to provide elementary education for freedmen and refugees. "If you will pass the amendment I have offered," he exclaimed to his colleagues in the House, "the Freedmen's Bureau becomes an instrumentality of more good than was ever before achieved in this world by any merely human agency. It means industry, prosperity, morality, and religion everywhere; a land rejoicing in wealth and glorious with liberty."¹⁴ Although the resolution passed, the millennium failed to follow. Within two years, Donnelly found himself out of office, defeated both in his bid for re-election and for a seat in the United States Senate.

FILLED WITH BOTH personal pique at having lost his seat in Congress and a new awareness of economic hardship that resulted, Donnelly launched his political career as an independent in 1870. He refused to subordinate his political will and judgment to party management. Clinging to an older, Enlightenment tradition whose roots go back to the 1720s in England, when Henry Bolingbroke defended the absolute independence and virtue of the country gentleman in Parliament against the commercial and administrative revolution of Robert Walpole, Donnelly ran for Congress on "the platform of Ignatius Donnelly." Significantly, he chose to represent the unorganized Minnesota farmers, exclaiming almost apocalyptically that the independent yeoman was the threatened backbone of the nation: "The great interest of Agriculture is almost voiceless in the nation. If it can achieve success, all lesser interests cling to it and will be carried forward with it to prosperity. If it perishes, the nation sinks."¹⁵

Donnelly's perception of himself in 1858 as a man not interested in "spoil and plunder" but in "sentiment and principle" made it likely he would become an independent. Unfortunately, to espouse the rhetoric of pious, anti-party politics at the dawn of the Gilded Age meant, as one of his friends advised him, "political annihilation forever in Minnesota."¹⁶ Although his personal popularity in Dakota County assured him a seat in the state legislature, without patronage or power, he felt as if his were a voice crying out from the political wilderness. "The Democratic party," he announced, was "like a mule — without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity."¹⁷

¹¹Theodore Nydahl, ed., typed transcript of Ignatius Donnelly diaries, 1858, p. 43, 1889, p. 74, in Minnesota Historical Society, division of archives and manuscripts.

¹²*Congressional Globe*, 38 Congress, 1 session, 857. Emphasis by author.

¹³Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly*, 115-148.

¹⁴*Congressional Globe*, 39 Congress, 1 session, 590.

¹⁵Cited by Hicks, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:90.

¹⁶Cited by Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly*, 132.

¹⁷Cited in John Bartlett, ed., *Familiar Quotations*, 12th ed., 260n (Boston, 1955).

He had equally unkind things to say about the Republicans who ignored him as well. In 1876, in response to the constant charges that, politically, he was a traitor without principles or party, or, as one opponent wrote, "everything by turns and nothing long," Donnelly outlined a rationale for his politics in the *Anti-Monopolist* (a weekly he founded because the party presses were of course closed to him):

Let no one accuse us of vacillation or inconsistency. No party owns us. We adhere to principle and follow where it leads. We propose to make our life a protest against the slavish rule of caucuses and rings which now afflicts this country. We are well aware that this is not the pathway that leads to political honors and emoluments. We do not seek them.¹⁸

When the *Pioneer Press* in 1874 divided up the Minnesota Senate, "Republicans 27; Democrats 13; Donnelly 1," he responded, "Good. We are not ranked in any department of the animals in the political menagerie but are a variety, species, order, and sub-kingdom, by ourself."¹⁹

Donnelly did not give up hope, however. He told a group of farmers in 1877 to remember "the great anti-slavery contest," particularly "the stormy days of misrepresentation, detraction, slander, and hatred in which [the martyrs of the movement] lived and labored." Emphasizing the righteousness of the farmers' cause and its historic ties to the earlier crusade, Donnelly concluded, "Let us strive to do our duty in our day and generation, as they did in theirs."²⁰

In a congressional contest of 1878 Donnelly suffered a painful defeat by a personal enemy, William D. Washburn. After unsuccessfully contesting the election in Washington, he was more positive than ever that his cause was just, but he was no longer certain that the "interest of Agriculture" could regain its autonomy. Deeply depressed and assuming that his life had been a failure, Donnelly turned his immediate attention away from politics. His campaign biography, *Donnelliana*, written in 1891, poignantly describes this critical period of his life:

He had been driven out of public life by the corrupt power of money; his crops had been devoured by corporations and grasshoppers; his newspaper, the *Anti-Monopolist* had been forced to suspend publication; he was covered with debts to the eye-lids. Instead of taking to drink to drown his sorrows, or going out and hanging himself, as some men would have done under similar circumstances, he retired to the "shades of Nininger;" and there, in the midst of the arctic cold and deep snows of a very severe winter, with the sheriff or the constable banging every day or two at the door, to serve a summons or an execu-

tion, he sat quietly down to recreate the history of man before the Deluge. He wrote *Atlantis*.²¹

Donnelly was not a subtle man. Rather than "going out and hanging himself," he projected his fears of and desires for destruction of the social system by writing about them. He found an outlet for his apocalyptic frame of mind in the legend of Atlantis. Collecting a host of references in folklore, geology, religion, mythology, science, and literature, he sought to prove Plato's contention that there once existed an island in the Atlantic Ocean called Atlantis where civilization began. According to Donnelly, Atlantis "became, in the course of ages, a populous and mighty nation [but] perished in a terrible convulsion of nature, in which the whole island sunk into the ocean, with nearly all its inhabitants." Fortunately, a few managed to escape the terrible volcanic catastrophe, and it is from the survivors, the author argued, that the present level of civilization evolved. "This lost people were our ancestors. Every line of race and thought, of blood and belief, leads back to them."²²

After *Atlantis* became a best-seller, Donnelly decided to write another book. *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel* was a logical successor to *Atlantis*. Like its predecessor, it dealt with sudden disaster and destruction. "Ragnarok," according to Donnelly, was the Scandinavian name for a prehistoric comet which caused the "Drift" or the great deposits of clay, sand, and gravel found on earth. It was impossible for Donnelly to believe that the earth's geological formations could be explained by the slow movement of glaciers. On the contrary, he thought that "a world-convulsing catastrophe . . . a gigantic and terrible event . . . something quite out of the ordinary . . . sudden and overwhelming" destroyed a "fair and glorious world" — which must have had considerable appeal for a Minnesota writer — "that knew no frost, no cold, no ice, no snow."²³

Compared with *Atlantis*, *Ragnarok* was far more graphic in its descriptions of the end of the world. Donnelly asked his readers:

Are there any words that can draw, even faintly, such a picture — its terror, its immensity, its horrors, its destructiveness, its surpassal of all earthly experience and imagination? And this human ant-hill, the world, how insignificant

¹⁸ Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 1, p. 83. The second quote is cited by Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly*, 172.

¹⁹ Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 2, p. 121.

²⁰ Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 2, p. 121.

²¹ Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 1, p. 106.

²² Ignatius Donnelly, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, 1, 2, 479 (New York, 1882).

²³ Ignatius Donnelly, *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*, 45, 56, 141 (New York, 1882).

would it be in the grasp of such a catastrophe! Its laws, its temples, its libraries, its religions, its armies, its mighty nations, would be but as the veriest stubble — dried grass, leaves, rubbish — crushed, smashed, buried, under this heaven-rain of horrors.

"But lo!" as if that were not enough, Donnelly added, "through the darkness the wretches not beaten down and whelmed in the *débris*, but scurrying to maintain caves for refuge, have a new terror, the cry passes from lip to lip, 'The world is on fire!'"²⁴

The significance of *Atlantis* and *Ragnarok*, in addition to offering nineteenth-century readers what contemporary Americans can find in the movies, lies in the logical extension of prehistoric apocalypse to the threatened termination of civilization during the Gilded Age. Although in *Atlantis* Donnelly did not discuss political issues, apart from an allusion to the value of gold and silver as an "Atlantean superstition," in *Ragnarok* he suggested that corruption and cataclysm may be interrelated. In fact, he hinted that soon the world might again be "destroyed by fire." Donnelly warned, "Do not count too much, Dives, on your lands and houses and parchments; your guns and cannon and laws; your insurance companies and your governments. There may be even now [a comet] coming with glowing countenance and horrid hair, and millions of tons of *débris*, to overwhelm you and your possessions, and your corporations and all the ant-like devices of man in one common ruin." Only if mankind would "readjust the values of labor, and increase the productive capacity of Nature, that plenty and happiness, light and hope, may dwell in every heart," Donnelly concluded, would "God fend off the comets" and not destroy the world. Clearly, in *Ragnarok*, if not in *Atlantis* as well, Donnelly expounded his longing for a natural, small, and community-oriented economy in which all men would share equal wealth and opportunity, posing as its alternative, sudden universal destruction. Indeed, both books were intense moral statements. The jump from popular science to the "Populist Manifesto" for Donnelly was a very small one, both deeply rooted as they were in his Jacksonian idea of a pastoral and harmonious America.²⁵

IN ADDITION to locating the apocalypse in either the

²⁴ Donnelly, *Ragnarok*, 107–108.

²⁵ Donnelly, *Atlantis*, 347; Donnelly, *Ragnarok*, 424, 440–441.

²⁶ Pollack, in *Mid-America*, 47:101.

²⁷ Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's CIPHER in the So-called Shakespeare Plays*, 224 (Chicago, 1888).

²⁸ Ignatius Donnelly, *The American People's Money*, 186 (Chicago, 1895).

distant past or the near future, Donnelly made *The Great Cryptogram* the consuming passion of his life. In nearly a thousand-page work written and researched over a ten-year period, Donnelly set out to prove that it was really Bacon who wrote Shakespeare's plays. Norman Pollack, believing that "in essence Donnelly represents little but himself," notes facetiously that "few Populists were Baconians." By refusing to consider the nature of Donnelly's mind, however, Pollack misses a major point. The significance for the historian is not that Donnelly was a Baconian, but *why* and, more important, *how* he arrived at his conclusions. The answers tell us something not only about Donnelly but about Populism as well.²⁶

Donnelly divided *The Great Cryptogram* into two parts. He devoted the first section to a discussion of literary style and biographical data by which he purported to show that Shakespeare could not have written the plays. For example, he claimed that Shakespeare was a creditor and therefore could not have created the character Shylock while Bacon, who he said was "the victim of a Jew money-lender," was the more likely author of *The Merchant of Venice*.²⁷ In the second half of the book, however, Donnelly offered what was for him conclusive proof of his argument. He claimed to have found a cipher or a mathematical code which Bacon implanted in the plays attesting to his authorship. Donnelly's analysis of the cipher is long and tortured, involving multiplication, addition, and subtraction of long columns of numbers, but what is significant was his intense conviction that there existed a simple answer, despite its seeming complexity, for a problem he confronted. Later, as a Populist, he insisted with equal vehemence that there was a single, simple solution for America's ills — the extension of the money supply. Fiat money, he wrote in 1895, would mean "the dawn of the world's perfect morning — universal prosperity; universal happiness — equal opportunity and fair play over all the earth." The style is the same.²⁸

Financially, *The Great Cryptogram* was a disaster. Lamenting its failure, Donnelly noted in his diary, "I had hoped that the ill fortune which has persued [*sic*] me for twenty years — since 1868 — would have lifted and left me; but my book is a failure; and my political prospects are dark, for there is no hope for a poor man accomplishing anything among the base and sorded [*sic*] politicians of Minnesota." Nevertheless, in 1889 he made another bid for a seat in the United States Senate. Donnelly never quit. Collecting only fifteen votes out of 110, he watched his old foe, William D. Washburn, win the election. Frustrated, he again turned to literature — this time to fiction. Instead of discovering the apocalypse in the distant past, his new novel, *Caesar's Column*, foresaw the end of civilization occurring in 1988. In May, 1889, Donnelly noted that he was "incited to write it by

two motives" — the same two motives that had directed his whole life — "first to do some good; [and] secondly to make some money." He then admitted candidly that "the idea of such a work came to me the night after Washburn was elected to the U. S. Senate; and I believe that if mankind does not change its course the book will be prophetic." In *Donnelliana* he claimed even to have written the first chapter that night, appalled by the "perfect holocaust of corruption" that resulted in Washburn's election. *Caesar's Column* was not only compensation for political defeat, however. Donnelly's literature, like his political style, flowed from a frame of mind that relied more on fantasy than reality. In this sense, political frustration followed inevitably from his pietist persuasion which fed both his politics and his polemics.²⁹

Caesar's Column was written by an author in a deep depression. When he finished the novel, Donnelly lamented to himself, "I have been much dejected of late. Everything goes against me . . . I have written a book called *Caesar's Column* to show the tendency of the times; — but in all probability a stupid and perverse generation will have none of it."³⁰ This time his pessimism was to be misplaced. Although *Caesar's Column* never matched the popularity of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a novel written in a similar genre in 1887, it was, even by today's standards, a best-seller.³¹ The unexpected, fantastic response to his book lifted Donnelly's spirits. Now elated, he saw his book as great moral fiction. Donnelly exclaimed: "The year 1889 may be set down as a great year in the annals of the struggle of the people of the whole world for their rights against the encroachments of capital, for in that year was written a book which has become the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the new revolution, — *Caesar's Column*."³²

IN FICTION Donnelly discovered a suitable medium to express himself. In a novel he could give free rein to his rich fantasy life. He could put forward the Populist panaceas that he was confident would save the world, and, moreover, he could describe the agrarian utopia that so eluded him in real life without compromise and without restraint. The three novels he wrote between 1889 and 1892, although on different subjects, reveal many similarities when viewed together. In all of them Donnelly is not only author but preacher and politician.

Caesar's Column is a novel in the form of a series of letters written by Gabriel Weltstein to his brother in Uganda describing a visit to New York in 1888. Gabriel is only a thinly disguised Donnelly. Like the Minnesota Populist, he is naïve and incredulous before the world he portrays. The New York Gabriel visits represents all of the Populist fears exaggerated to their extreme. That Donnelly quit a teeming, disorderly Philadelphia when he was twenty-five, of course, was no coincidence. The

world is divided into two classes — a small but omnipotent plutocracy which lives in luxury, supported by masses of underfed, overworked, degraded urban laborers. While a small Council of the Oligarchy led by Prince Cabano (a Jew, born Jacob Isaacs) monopolizes all power to exploit the working class, the workers become mere "automata." To oppose the Oligarchy three men — Caesar Lomellini, a "brute" Italian immigrant driven off his foreclosed farm, a Russian Jew, described as "the brains of the organization," and Maximilian Petion, a patrician lawyer bent on revenge for his father who was destroyed by a corrupt court — organize a Brotherhood of Destruction.³³

The plot of the novel includes two sentimental love affairs but basically revolves around Gabriel's unsuccessful attempts to avert a catastrophic and suicidal war between the two armies. Gabriel writes: "The thought forever presses on me. Can I do nothing to avert this catastrophe? Is there no hope?" Unable to accept conditions as they had evolved and unwilling to believe that there was no good in men's souls, Gabriel, upon overhearing the Oligarchy's plans to slay ten million people, reveals his hiding place to deliver his first exhortation. "I clasped my head," he says to himself. "I must save the world from such a calamity. These men are human. They cannot be insensible to an appeal for mercy — for justice!" But Gabriel's first "folly" meets no more success than his second sermon at the workingmen's meeting. He tells the laborers — just as Donnelly announced to the Populists — "What the world needs is a new organization — a great world-wide Brotherhood of Justice." At the conclusion of his speech Gabriel realizes that he "did not touch their hearts," for as one of his listeners tells him afterwards, "You have arrived on the scene too late." He makes one more attempt, however, to convert the people he saw destined for destruction. In an answer to "A Twentieth Century Sermon" extolling lust, Gabriel proclaims that only Christianity could overcome the "cruelty and heartlessness of Nature." But his mission is to no avail; Gabriel has to agree with his friend that "'the only preacher that will ever convert that congregation is Caesar Lomellini,'" the apotheosis of anarchy.³⁴

²⁹Nydahl, Donnelly diaries, July 18, 1888, p. 23, May 17, 1889, p. 12, Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 1, p. 119.

³⁰Nydahl, Donnelly diaries, May 28, 1889, p. 14.

³¹Within two months of its publication in April, 1890, the first 2,000 copies of *Caesar's Column* sold out. By January, 1891, it was selling at a rate of 1,000 copies a week, and by the end of the year over 60,000 people had bought it. Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Walter B. Rideout, xviii-xix (Cambridge, 1960).

³²Fish, *Donnelliana*, part 1, p. 119.

³³Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 26, 38, 127, 190.

³⁴Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 71, 137, 170, 171, 174, 189, 190.

After elaborate plotting involving conspiracy, deceit, and intrigue, the novel proceeds to the inevitable universal conflagration. In a war between the "plunderers and the plundered," apart from the heroes and the anarchist Jew who flees with the Brotherhood's funds "to make himself king in Jerusalem . . . and revive the ancient splendors of the Jewish race," everyone is killed. The carnage is so great that there develops a problem of what to do with the dead. Finally, it is decided to erect a tremendous cement column in which to put "the bodies of a quarter of a million of human beings," commemorating "The Death and Burial of MODERN CIVILIZATION."³⁵

Caesar's Column stands as a warning to a nation that Donnelly sees as having lost its direction and sense of value. It is a testimonial to a rapidly changing era. At the conclusion of the novel, however, the author offers a utopian alternative to the apocalyptic picture he presents. Not surprisingly, "the garden in the mountains," the heroes' and their sweethearts' refuge in Uganda, is an idealized image of Jacksonian America. There is only one town in the colony, and even there everyone lives on plots of not less than a half acre. Public education insures equal and frictionless citizenry in which "a sentiment of brotherly love dwells in all hearts." Equal justice and prosperity for all bind an honest yeomanry together. In short, Donnelly argues paradise is possible; "and how little it costs to make mankind hap-

³⁵ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 282, 283. Much has been written about the antisemitism in Donnelly's works. Perhaps no other issue has engaged the attention of intellectual historians concerned with Populism as much as has the question of whether it was antisemitic or not. The debate centering on Donnelly — because he used antisemitic stereotypes — concentrates on a small element of Populist thought and is, therefore, at a dead end. Focusing rather on Donnelly's apocalyptic style, it is possible to see how for him the Jew was an agent of change. In *Atlantis*, for example, he revealed his fascination with Jewish survival. "Even skepticism," he wrote, "must pause before the miracle of the continued existence of this strange people, wading through the ages, bearing on their shoulders the burden of their great trust, and pressing forward under the force of a perpetual and irresistible impulse. . . . The continuous life of one people — one poor, obscure, and wretched people — spans the tremendous gulf between [Atlantis] and this nineteenth century" (Donnelly, *Atlantis*, 212–213). The power that Jews exercise in *Caesar's Column* makes sense, therefore, because to Donnelly, who may not have been personally prejudiced, the Jews helped generate destruction though they themselves survived.

³⁶ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 311, 312.

³⁷ Ignatius Donnelly, *Doctor Huguet*, 11, 54, 56, 76, 90 (Chicago, 1891).

³⁸ Donnelly, *Doctor Huguet*, 162, 288–290; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny*, 110–117 (New York, 1971).

py!" Basically, since he founded *Nininger* in 1856, Donnelly had not altered his conception of the good life; only his apocalyptic yearning had grown more intense as American society moved with an accelerating pace farther and farther from his ideal of pastoral harmony.³⁶

PERHAPS remembering his attempt in Congress to provide elementary education for Blacks in the South, Donnelly decided to write a novel on race relations in South Carolina. Published in 1891, *Doctor Huguet* in many ways misjudged the interests and the prejudices of the public who found their hopes and fears expressed in *Caesar's Column*. The book did not sell well, but to the historian *Doctor Huguet* provides another link between Donnelly's Populism and his earlier political career. In the novel Donnelly continued to criticize American society of the late nineteenth century from a Populist perspective and also to preach moral solutions for its problems.

Doctor Huguet is a genteel Southern aristocrat who happens to hold advanced views on the racial question. For example, he suggests to his outraged neighbors that whites are but "bleached" Blacks and that "under favorable conditions" the former slaves could become the equal of their old masters. Because Huguet, with Donnelly, views "public life as discredited, if not dishonored," he does not at first compromise his ideals. Under his fiancée's influence, however, he decides to run for Congress. She further persuades him then, in the interests of election, to make speeches counter to his liberal opinions. After telling her that the "people need prophets" — true leaders who would place the rule of the nation under the government of God — he reluctantly gives in to her wishes. The next morning, having committed the most grievous of all sins in Donnelly's mind — compromising an ideal for political expediency — Huguet wakes up in the bed and body of Sam Johnson, the lowest "nigger chicken-thief" in the county. In the meantime, Sam's soul has taken over Huguet's body and possessions.³⁷

Doctor Huguet is not at all pleased with his new station in life. After an attempt at suicide, though, he decides to utilize his considerable intellectual abilities and seek employment. He finds, however, that no one would hire him despite his obvious qualifications. "It was this dreadful black skin that dragged me down," he exclaims. "This it was that rendered education, knowledge, wisdom, energy, of no avail." Finally, with the help of Reverend J. J. Love from "Nigger Hollow," Huguet "finds his mission." He establishes a school for illiterate Black farmers. As did Harriet Beecher Stowe, Donnelly traded on an Abolitionist stereotype of Blacks as a pious and intuitive people.³⁸

The school becomes more than a place to teach the alphabet, however. In his capacity as educator, Huguet

begins to preach to his admiring students who become his congregation. After advising the whites who join his crusade to be charitable and the Blacks to eschew violence, Huguet, the teacher and minister, adopts a third role, that of a political leader. As a Populist in the South, he proclaims: "The curse of our land is party slavery. It is worse for the negro than the old physical slavery." If only the two races would join together, Huguet urges, in "a great passionate cry for justice," then together they could unleash a "reign of peace and love and brotherhood." But before he finishes, a band of whites, among whom is Sam Johnson in Huguet's body, attacks the school and kills all of the Blacks. In the course of the battle Huguet gets his body back, but not before he has made the author's point: Either, as Huguet says over his friends' graves at the conclusion of the novel, "Brotherly Love . . . must melt away forever the hates of races and the contentions of castes" or there will be universal destruction.³⁹

EVEN MORE than *Doctor Huguet*, Donnelly's *The Golden Bottle* is a Populist tract in the form of a novel. Written during the campaign of 1892, it "intended to explain and defend, in the thin disguise of a story, some of the new ideas put forth by the People's Party."⁴⁰ With the exception of imperialism, the ideas were not new at all, however. They were the same ones Donnelly had been living with for years — the politics of conversion, a millennial view of the future, and, of course, the threat of apocalypse. If the inspiration for *Doctor Huguet* came from the Antislavery and Reconstruction movements, no less was *The Golden Bottle* — and by extension the People's party — modeled upon the politics and mores of the earlier era.

Ephraim Benezet, Donnelly's narrator and alterego, is a poverty-stricken young man living on a Kansas farm. At one time he had planned to become a minister but decides instead to worship "the sublime Architect of the Universe" by remaining on his family's farm. But, as he proclaims such high hopes for the future, the mortgage — "that dragon of modern civilization" — falls overdue. The night before the fatal separation of the family from their land was to occur, the "Pity of God" comes to Ephraim and gives him a golden bottle which turns ordinary metal into gold. After paying off the mortgage, Ephraim decides that he was chosen to no less than "redeem mankind."⁴¹

Before he commences his great work, however, Ephraim rescues his sweetheart, Sophie Hetherington, from an Omaha jail where she is kept for horse-whipping her boss, who, through starvation wages, had tried to make her succumb to him. It is significant that Sophie joins Ephraim in his struggle to save mankind. The Populists, like the Abolitionists before them, urged women to come out of their homes and employ their

purser feminine instincts in reforming the nation. With Ephraim's help, Sophie organizes a women's cooperative which later becomes the Woman's League of America. A nation-wide collective, it "worked wonders

The race rose with the elevation of the *matrix* of the race: for the river of humanity cannot ascend above the level of its fountain — woman." Later in the novel, when Benezet as commander-in-chief of the United States army liberates Europe, Sophie leads a division of men into victorious battle!⁴²

With his unlimited power to create money, Benezet begins his crusade by revolutionizing the financial world. Lending money at 2 per cent per annum to farmers in Butler County, Kansas, he establishes his own small sub-treasury. Not surprisingly, given the Populist faith in the sub-treasury scheme, universal prosperity quickly comes to Butler County. But like Donnelly, Benezet is not satisfied with reform in a single county when the entire nation, indeed the whole planet, longs for deliverance. He therefore decides to address Congress to urge it to do for the nation what he has done in Butler County — namely, create money. His speech and proposal to rescue the "sturdy yeomanry" by issuing paper currency is greeted with great enthusiasm, and as Benezet leaves the Capitol he feels he "had *converted* Congress." His choice of words reveals that a leading Populist orator, Ignatius Donnelly, during the campaign of 1892 was thinking more in religious than political terms.⁴³

Unfortunately, behind Congress stands the unconverted, corrupt power of Plutocracy. Through their control of the press, the Plutocrats determine public opinion. And since they own the Supreme Court, they are also able to thwart "progress" if "the people should coerce House, Senate and President to do something against the moneyed aristocracy." Benezet, therefore, decides to bypass representative government and create his own personal revolution. With his unlimited wealth, he founds a weekly newspaper called the *Anti-Monopolist*, establishes a new town, and builds a railroad to serve the farmers, thus reviving the three main efforts of Donnelly's pre-Populist past. So impressive is the impact of Benezet's revolution — "there was no more discontent, for each man understood the business conditions, and saw that he had a fair share of the general division" (the old Jacksonian conception of the good so-

³⁹ Donnelly, *Doctor Huguet*, 309. "The most terrible element in apocalyptic thinking," literary critic Frank Kermode has written, "is its certainty that there must be universal bloodshed." See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, 107 (London, 1966).

⁴⁰ Ignatius Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle, or the Story of Ephraim Benezet of Kansas*, 3 (New York, 1892).

⁴¹ Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 11, 25, 49, 65.

⁴² Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 104.

⁴³ Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 132.

ciety) — that “Jay Gould went out and hung himself. And *all the people* said — Amen!” The pietists’ victory was complete; America had been converted.⁴⁴

Very soon the people elect Benezet president of the United States on the People’s party platform, the older parties, and by extension democratic government as well, having crumbled to dust before his popular onslaught. In his inaugural address Benezet tells the nation that “America was united by a ligament to a corpse — Europe!” and that it is not enough “to close the portals of the continent against the wretched victims of Old-World injustice and despotism.” America should prepare for war so that “the doctrines of the Revolution of 1776 will yet extend over the continents.” It was insufficient to save only the United States; the entire world had to be converted. The moral absolutism latent in the pietists’ vision emerges in a celebration of imperialism and expansion at the conclusion of the novel. Donnelly’s “high mission” of the Civil War became by 1892 a vehicle for a monolithic, authoritarian, and imperialist world view. In successive chapters entitled “The Day of Jubilee,” “Armageddon,” “The Millennium,” “Christianity,” and “The Universal Republic,” Benezet conquers Europe. The evangelical spirit that swept over the St. Louis and Omaha conventions extends to a new Christian era in *The Golden Bottle*.⁴⁵

IN 1895, in the heat of the free silver fever which swept the nation, Donnelly published another book called *The American People’s Money* in which he amplified the point of *The Golden Bottle* — that fiat money would lead to the millennium. Not to be outdone by William H. Harvey’s *Coin’s Financial School*, published in 1894, Donnelly also based his book upon a dialogue and included in it dramatic cartoons to illustrate his themes. In many ways at the close of the century, Donnelly, now an old man, made the most explicit statement of what he wanted in *The American People’s Money*:

God give us back the simplicity, the purity

⁴⁴Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 145, 170, 172.

⁴⁵Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 202, 204.

⁴⁶Donnelly, *The American People’s Money*, 136.

⁴⁷Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 97.

and the prosperity of the early days, when Jefferson rode to the Capitol to be inaugurated (after blacking his own boots) on horseback; when Andrew Jackson hurled the conquerors of Napoleon pell mell out of the valley of the Mississippi, and then proceeded to crush the head of the giant serpent of Plutocracy, represented by the National Bank and smashed the reign of corruption for a generation. Would that we could call up old Andy from his grave.⁴⁶

But it was no more possible for Donnelly to resurrect “old Andy” than it was for America to return to an agrarian age when, it was thought, each man could stake out his own claim on the future of limitless opportunity and abundance.

If Donnelly’s life is measured by his effort to restore a past era, to recreate the economic and social conditions that were quickly disappearing as he entered politics, then, like Populism itself, it was a failure. But Donnelly’s perspective was not simply nostalgic or backward-looking; it never left the pietistic and agrarian roots on which it was based. As the Jacksonian conception of a natural economy and a just society — “wide enough to enrich, without distinction, all it may include” — became increasingly outmoded, as businessmen and party organizers tightened their grip on American life, Donnelly’s incipient fear of apocalypse grew, providing not only a source for his numerous ventures in writing but also an alternative political model in the People’s party of the 1890s. Although the Populists succeeded in *converting* the Democratic party in 1896, the Bryan campaign proved fatal for both parties. Richard Hofstadter suggests that third parties are like bees. After they sting, they die.⁴⁷ In this case, not only the bee died; but, having adopted parts of the Populists’ political persuasion and platform, the Democratic party lost four successive presidential campaigns. Clearly, an era to which Ignatius Donnelly had dedicated his life to reviving had finally ended.

THE PICTURE of Donnelly on p. 102 was taken in 1898, and belongs to the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The engraving on the same page depicts the eruption of Vesuvius in 1737 and is from Donnelly’s *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, 41 (New York, 1882).



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