

# 'The Great Commoner' and Immigration

by Robert Kyser

One hundred years ago in June, 1896, William Jennings Bryan, "the boy orator of the Platte," was swept into national prominence as the nominee of the Democratic Party for president. His famous speech, ending with the ringing phrase "you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," put forward a policy by which the progressives of the Midwest and South could champion the cause of the farmers and laborers of the nation over against the railroad magnates and bankers who were perceived as having a monopolistic hold on their well-being — the financiers of a plutocratic conspiracy against the honest toilers of the nation. The political disillusionment of the agrarian reformers came on the heels of economic disillusionment.

The Republican Party raised enormous sums of money for the 1896 campaign and hired an army of speakers to counter Bryan's arguments for the coinage of free silver. On election day, Bryan polled more votes than any candidate had received before — and lost. He went on to be nominated twice more for the presidency, serving as an influential titular head of the Democratic Party during a lengthy stint of "loyal opposition" until Wilson gained the White House in 1912 and named Bryan his Secretary of State.

The populist and progressive roots of Bryan's political philosophy have been disparaged as being "nativist." Historian Paul Glad<sup>1</sup> reminds us that Bryan's political supporters were the farmers and small businessmen of the Midwest and South, that their religion was essentially a moralistic American Protestantism, refined on the frontier, which led

them to disparage the Catholic and Jewish faiths of the wave of immigrants arriving in the 1890s.

In a speech in 1896, candidate Bryan said: "Our opponents have sometimes tried to make it appear that we were attacking a race when we denounced the financial policy advocated by the Rothchilds. But we are not; we are as much opposed to the financial policy of J. Pierpont Morgan as we are to the financial policy of the Rothchilds. We are not attacking a race; we are attacking greed and avarice, which know

neither race nor religion" (Bryan, *The First Battle*, p.581).

Professor Glad tells us that on the question of unrestricted Oriental immigration, Bryan divided the proponents into two groups: those who believed that "universal brotherhood requires us to welcome to our shores people of all lands"; and those who favored the open door "on the ground that it will furnish cheap labor for household and factory work" (Bryan, in his newsletter, *The Commoner*, December 6, 1901). Certainly he sided with the "toilers" he claimed to represent in the national



William Jennings Bryan, 1860-1925

arena when he indicated that if the immigrant was advantageous for the employer who wanted to cut labor costs, it was the opposite for the American workers driven into the streets (*The Commoner*, March 11, 1901).

Regarding immigration from the Orient, Bryan wrote: "Our own power to help the world by the absorption of surplus population has certain natural and necessary limitations. We have a mission to fulfill and we can not excuse ourselves if we cripple our energies in a mistaken effort to carry a burden heavier than our strength can support" (*The Commoner*, March 30, 1906). □

<sup>1</sup> Citations of Bryan's speeches and writings are by Paul Glad, *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and His Democracy, 1896-1912*, University of Nebraska Press, 1960.

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# Denis Kearney and the Chinese Exclusion Acts

## *Semi-slave competition hurts American workers*

by Kevin Jenks

**D**uring the recent debate over California's Proposition 187, neither side spoke of Denis Kearney, a Californian whose name was once a byword for immigration controversy. Should readers wonder just who Denis Kearney was, they are not alone. There is still no biography of this 19th-century Irish immigrant to the Golden State. Even for those specialists in American immigration history who have touched on his career, Kearney remains more a symbol than a man.

In the late 1870s, however, Denis Kearney and what his ideologically minded foes called "Kearneyism" dominated headlines in California, and made news across the nation. At the head of his Workingmen's Party, Kearney forged California's white laborers into a feared political force for economic and political reform, including exclusion of Chinese "coolie" labor. Within five years of the inception of Kearney's brief public career Congress passed, and President Chester Arthur signed into law, the first measure to restrict Chinese immigration into America.

As the man who epitomized opposition to the Chinese presence, Kearney has been diabolized, both by his contemporaries and subsequent writers, as have few other figures in American history. For James Bryce, the influential British historian and diplomat, Kearney was "...a demagogue of a common type, noisy and confident, but with neither political foresight nor constructive talent." American diplomatic historian Thomas Bailey dismisses Kearney and his heavily Irish followers as comical though bigoted

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Harvard's Samuel Eliot Morrison writes that Kearney organized riots against the Chinese, while Yen Ching-Hwang, in his *Coolies and Mandarins*, first accuses Kearney and his Workingmen's Party of "[the] most barbaric behavior of burning Chinese buildings and killing the Chinese," then cites a string of incidents, all of which took place *before* Kearney was active and the Workingmen's Party existed.

Frank Roney, a rival of Kearney's for leadership of the Workingmen's Party, claimed not only that Kearney was a mere opportunist, but that his impassioned speeches were ghostwritten by a newspaperman. Gertrude Atherton, a San Francisco society lady who once met Kearney, derided him as an empty blusterer who was "...merely talk, talk, talk," then hints that he was bribed into retiring from politics in the 1880s.

Even those sympathetic to Chinese exclusion have often been less than favorable to Kearney. The antics of Kearney and the Workingmen's Party caused President Hayes to veto the Fifteen-Passenger Bill (in 1879), the contemporary Democrats charged; later historians, such as E.C. Sandmeyer (in his standard study, "The Anti-Chinese Movement in California") and S.B. Miller, claim the importance of the role of Kearney's party in securing Chinese exclusion has been much exaggerated.

Veiled in century-old obscurity, strait-jacketed in academic and political animus, who was Denis Kearney? What, if anything, did Kearney accomplish, and what significance does he hold for today's immigration reformer? To answer these questions, it is necessary first to look at the Chinese who were streaming to America, the Americans who welcomed them, and those Americans, native and immigrant, who raised the cry for Chinese exclusion.

### **First Entry of the Chinese**