

J. Anthony Lukas *Big Trouble* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1997).

In his search for a point in United States history in which social class and class awareness made a tangible impression on popular thought and action, Pulitzer Prize-winner J. Anthony Lukas discovered the hard-rock mining region of the West at the turn of the last century. Lukas then turns a series of events — the assassination of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg and the subsequent kidnapping and trial of union leaders for that crime — into the supporting beams of a reconstruction of that era.

Steunenberg's death by bombing grew out of the violence of the region and the period. As the mine owners, their agents and supporters — most government officials, the state militia, private detective agencies, and even federal troops — squared off against the miners and their labour and socialist allies, class conflict frequently flared in pre-World War I society. Bombings, shootings, illegal imprisonments (some of these last by Steunenberg) — *the rule of force, in a phrase* — occurred often in Idaho, Colorado, and elsewhere. The men whom the mine owners and their politicians sought to execute in retaliation for the murder were no strangers to brutal class warfare.

George A. Pettibone, a “rabid anarchist,” according to an undercover Pinkerton agent, had served as financial secretary of the Coeur d’Alenes miners’ union. (102-04) Convicted of criminal conspiracy for “insurrection and rebellion” in 1892, Pettibone — descended from a Welsh Roundhead’s family that boasted pioneers and American Revolutionaries — was known both as an executive board member of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) and as the inventor of a powerful incendiary weapon known by various names, including Pettibone Dope. (297) By the time of Steunenberg’s death on December 30, 1905, Pettibone operated an appliance store in Denver, but he continued to act as an adviser of the union. (214)

The best known of the kidnapped WFM leaders was William “Big Bill” Haywood, the union’s secretary-treasurer. Burly and handsome, Haywood wore a patch over a blinded eye and epitomized for many the dangerous core of labour’s left wing. A founder of the WFM and, in 1905, of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Haywood carried the class struggle in his family and personal history and gave voice to thousands of men and women who clung to life in mining camps and towns throughout the West.

Moyer served as president of the WFM and was the most guarded of the three defendants. His relationship with Haywood, uneasy before the crisis, soured under stress; by time of the trial, Moyer was not on speaking terms with either Haywood or Pettibone. Yet, the efforts of Pinkerton detective James

McParland to peel Moyer from the others and gain a confession failed. (691-97) Moyer would have his day against Haywood, but not at the expense of the latter's life.

Lukas ventures far beyond the trial of the union leaders, however, because he attempts to capture the whole of the society in which the trial occurred. Lukas's ambition is the epic, a non-fictional equivalent of *Ragtime* or *Underworld*. So, while the bombing and the trial stitch the narrative together, the author's digressions — the trial takes up only about fifty of the 880 pages — provide the substance of turn-of-the-century life in the United States. Defense attorney Clarence Darrow appears and claims 45 pages of material, and his interest in baseball provides grist for discussing the place of that pastime in the nation, as well as for treatment of the career of Walter Johnson, who pitched in Idaho in 1906-07. Ethel Barrymore spent an afternoon in the courtroom during this "trial of the century," and Lukas responds with twenty-five pages on the Barrymores, the Drews, and the American theater.

The author's advance by digression rewards the reader who wishes to know the period well and to taste flavors that the quantifiers cannot replicate. This approach may irritate those whose interest remains chiefly in the murder case. Granted, the editor's hand could have been more evident, but wisdom lay in allowing Lukas to roam. The reader develops a feeling for this vast land and its many peoples, its opportunities and injustices, its corruption and idealism. Throughout the account lurks the oppressive presence of class.

Lukas makes it clear that "the majesty of the law" referred, in the minds of its proponents, to white men of means and position. It was not expected to include in its purview the "undesirable citizen," such as Haywood or Moyer (President Theodore Roosevelt's description of them) or recent immigrant groups or African Americans or women or working-class people in general. That twelve farmers and ranchers, subjected to the eloquence of prosecutors Senator William Borah and James H. Hawley — the best that money could buy — and to the confession of the admitted perpetrator, Canadian Harry Orchard (born Albert E. Horsely), could reach a verdict of not guilty in the Haywood and Pettibone cases seemed "impossible" to those who had overseen the kidnappings, solicited illegal private contributions for the prosecution, and otherwise railroaded the union men at every opportunity. Lukas captures the shock and frustration of the elite in Roosevelt's post-verdict complaint about the bitter attacks which he suffered "because of what I did in trying to back up the party of law and order, of elementary civilization, in Idaho, against the thugs and murderers who have found their typical representation in Moyer and Haywood, in Pettibone and Debs." (731) That he issued this statement even as he connived

to place Borah in the best possible tactical position for the senator's trial for land fraud plunges the reader into a new depth of understanding of the period and its protagonists.

The book provides little about Pettibone and Moyer, while offering sizeable sketches of the better-known Haywood and other prominent figures of the time. To this extent, Lukas perhaps exercises the bias which he detects in the mainstream press of the day, which saw as newsworthy the movement of stock prices while it ignored the miseries of working people. (633) Nonetheless, Lukas's exposure of the news media — he quotes Upton Sinclair on a public opinion “poisoned at the source” by the Associated Press — deserves praise. The AP, the *New York Times*, the “fiercely anti-union” *New York Sun*, and their on-the-scene reporters who developed cuddly relationships with the prosecution, all perform in Lukas's retrospective spotlight. (633-85) Moreover, the author indicates clearly the censorship exercised by the business community over the mainstream press, (649ff) even as he portrays the alternative press, complete with warts and moles. (667ff)

The key to the book's one significant flaw lies in Lukas's quote from writer C. P. Connolly's description of the forces at work around the Caldwell, Idaho, trial: “It is war, and the methods of war have been adopted.” Yet, having cited Connolly, and having further observed that “the grand imperative — the destruction of the WFM” remained the overriding aim of Idaho Governor Frank Gooding, of attorney Hawley, and of the Pinkertons, (682) Lukas loses focus toward the end and treats the murder case as a mystery to be solved. He wanders away wondering about “who struck down the governor on that snowy night in Caldwell.”

Despite its shortcomings, *Big Trouble* demands attention from those interested in the development of modern society in the United States. The book bestows many rewards upon the reader. Lukas, whose prize-winning *Common Ground* had earlier attracted deserved praise, is confirmed in his status as a significant presence in twentieth century American letters.

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