

Carlotta R. Anderson, *All American Anarchist: Joseph A. Labadie and the Labor Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

Imagine the horror, a book about an anarchist who the author, that anarchist's granddaughter, calls "All-American." Double humbug. But there it is, and within it is a warm delight of how history might be done well, the flaws of history done through lenses scratched by time — and most importantly, how a radical life might be influential and well lived, simultaneously inconsequential and moving. Carlotta Anderson's loving work on her grandfather's life and works is both history carefully done, and itself an historical document on how history was once seen.

Let me digress. I am on a Marxist list-serv on the internet. The moderator, a fallen Trotskyist, recently posted an introductory note in which he said, "I am not here to make friends. I am here to sharpen the critique." For my part, this is the crux of where he, and many of us, have had it wrong. For if the left is to make lasting change, it must learn to love as heartily as it learns to fight ruthlessly. This lesson is embedded both in Anderson's critique and Labadie's passionate and peculiar life. Since every piece of history is simultaneously an analysis of the past, from a standpoint in a shifting present, embedded with a call to action within its developing view, Ms Anderson's work lends a sense of honest discipline and care that activists and historians can enjoy.

How can one not like anarchist Jo Labadie who said, "Consume all you produce, spend a lot and you will be forced to demand a lot?" Listen to Labadie's take on anti-racism: "No one who is willing to work can be the cause of another's poverty." Here is Labadie speaking to those who cowered away from support of the Haymarket battle of 1886, "Curse the law. What the deuce are we organized for if it is not to overturn the law?" Labadie denounced the Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920, urging rank and filers to holster Colt revolvers to ward off bullies.

But who could not be aggravated, and simultaneously tickled, by the contradictions of an individualist anarchist who liked and supported Samuel Gompers and the AFL because they, initially, rejected electoral politics, or who saw no real problem with accepting property, vacations, indeed an entire retirement from wealthy benefactors, saying that he would give the rich a chance to redeem themselves? Who could not be intrigued by Labadie, the Detroit radical who stood solid in support of the Haymarket martyrs, whose devotion to his deeply Catholic wife, Sophie, never wavered and who, in his old age, joined her in naked frolics in a cold bubbling spring surrounded by flowers just by their summer home — donated by a rich friend?

Labadie's life arches across the foundational period of North American radicalism and unionism, the industrialization of the U.S., the creation of the working class and its experiments with organization. A printer by trade, he was an early organizer for the Knights of Labor, and the author of *Cranky Notions*,

a column aptly titled which outlasted the dozen or so journals in which it appeared. Convinced that education and agitation were the founts of social change, a change that Labadie usually posited as peaceful, he wrote prodigiously, watched one publication after another fail — and never quit. He picked up and forged ahead, one journal replacing the next, until he became sufficiently well-known to publish in the more mainstream press. At the close of his life, he was collecting works for yet another publication.

Labadie's life also traces the growth and decay of the city of Detroit. When he arrived, after early years in what were then the Michigan wilds, Detroit was known as one of the most beautiful cities in the country. Lovely boulevards, shaded in the day by a canopy of trees, were lit at night by gaslights. It was a relatively prosperous city with growing industries in the stove works and pharmaceutical plants, the foundations of the auto industry to come. By the time of Labadie's death the city was mired in a depression, thousands of starving people lined the streets — canopied by the pollution of factory effluents when the big plants were open.

When Labadie arrived, young and full of enthusiasm for the “Injury to one is a concern for All,” notions of the Knights of Labor, Detroit too was full of hope. As he aged and the city moved through prosperity to organized decay, Labadie was reified, turned into the town's genteel, and always well-coifed anarchist, the “Pet Radical,” as Anderson suggests. He was made safe and the wealthy enjoyed his many discussion groups — perhaps as much or more than the poor. But Labadie made no pretense to be other than what he was, more easily understood today as a libertarian than an anarchist, passing quickly through the Socialist Labor Party he moved on to anarchism which he saw in harmony with the more natural, that is, frontier, days of his childhood. Labadie wanted no truck with revolutionary communists, “sailing under the false flag of anarchism,” or any other form of revolutionary action that might supplement the state at the expense of the individual.

He never grew rich from his labours, though his benefactors made sure he lived beyond his income. He had a stint in the early Michigan Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics, a state body won by the Knights of Labor and the forerunners of the American Federation of Labor. There he wrote a memorable commentary on the condition of poor and working people in the city in the 1890's. An individualist anarchist who rejected the centrality of class, Labadie later worked with Detroit's popular Mayor Hazen Pingree, an idiosyncratic radical in his own right who moved from owning a low-wage shoe factory to ardently supporting worker struggles in the early 1900s. City reporters knew that to ignore Labadie was to misunderstand Detroit. But he died in 1933, feeling that most of his work had accomplished little.

It must have been extraordinarily difficult to plumb the character of a person so complex and self-contradictory as Jo Labadie. Sometimes that complexity seems to make Ms Anderson stumble: “his good-natured self-

imposed identification with the lunatic fringe helped protect Labadie from being lumped with zealots and extremists.” The passionate man, writing volumes of essays and poems, lay himself open to a careful examination that most, less diligent or caring, easily avoid. Ms Anderson appears to have sifted through it all, focused on what she had at hand, and got it right.

If there are flaws, they are the kind of flaws that one would want to call the meticulous author and say, “Hey, what’s up with this?” Ms Anderson does not seem to always fully understand the context of all of Labadie’s struggles, the debate between Marx and Bakunin for example. However, one of the strengths of the book is her faithful attention to detail, and her willingness to address the many apparently impossible contradictions of Labadie’s life, without getting derailed by seeking a paradigm to make Labadie fit. There is an annoying, almost old-fashioned, tendency to follow Labadie’s lead and to trace ideas by bloodlines — to suggest that his partially American Indian blood had an impact on his thinking. Ms Anderson has an interesting take on the details of the Haymarket struggle, one that I am not familiar with in that she has Louis Ling, one of the convicted anarchists unjustly sentenced for the struggle that created today’s International May Day, blowing himself up with dynamite in his cell to beat the hangman.

Even so, Ms Anderson’s respectful history has courage. She correctly traces the involvement of the AFL with U.S. spy agencies to its support for the imperial World War I, something too many others conveniently miss. She goes on to explain how Labadie maintained his nearly obsequious yet also critical friendship with Samuel Gompers, the architect of the AFL’s deadly strategy of an open alliance with U.S. employers against the workers of the world. Ms Anderson has a wonderful section on the great millworkers’ strike in Saginaw Valley in 1885, the key labour battle of the century in Michigan, demolished by employer violence. Labadie was calling for dynamite and rifles. Any student seeking an understanding of Michigan, Detroit, or even North American radicalism would benefit from the pleasure of this book — and will come to understand how at least one anarchist could be properly called an “All-American.”

Good wife Sophie saved everything Labadie wrote — in piles in their Detroit attic. Labadie, ever principle over payment, turned down generous offers from the University of Wisconsin to store his works at the University of Michigan, his home-state school. It has been impossible to organize the old anarchist and his forebears. Labadie’s great and final legacy is the collection of his (and now many others’) radical writings in the collection named for him at the University of Michigan. Despite the dedicated efforts of Agnes Inglis who worked on it for 30 years, until 1952, and others to this day, no one has been able to fully catalogue everything in the Labadie collection. Indeed, Inglis, who spent a sizable inheritance backing anarcho-libertarian causes, may have deepened the enigma while she sought to make sense of it: her cataloging

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system was understood by her alone. Others have been plowing through it ever since.

At the end of the day, both Anderson and Labadie, in preserving their integrity, can answer the question that was put to the old radical, one that should be put to every historian and activist who sets out to change or understand the world, “Jo, what are you doing to keep that swar? (swear).”

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