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[Review of the Book "*Big Bill*" Haywood]

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[Review of the Book "*Big Bill*" Haywood]

Abstract

[Excerpt] This brief biography of William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, the charismatic leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) between 1905 and 1918, is an engaging introduction to Haywood's life. Although the volume was not intended to supplant Peter Carlson's *Roughneck: The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood* (1983) or Melvyn Dubofsky's own impressive *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (1969), this biography effectively sketches a number of the central juxtapositions that framed Haywood's life.

Keywords

William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, Industrial Workers of the World, IWW, labor movement, union organizing, worker rights

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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"Big Bill" Haywood. By Melvyn Dubofsky. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. Pp. viii, 184. \$19.95.

This brief biography of William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, the charismatic leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) between 1905 and 1918, is an engaging introduction to Haywood's life. Although the volume was not intended to supplant Peter Carlson's *Roughneck: The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood* (1983) or Melvyn Dubofsky's own impressive *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (1969), this biography effectively sketches a number of the central juxtapositions that framed Haywood's life.

A competent administrator who ran both his local of the Western Federation of Miners and, after 1915, the IWW itself in a brisk business manner, Haywood was nonetheless portrayed nationwide as a revolutionary anarchist bent on destroying American institutions. Haywood partly encouraged such depictions with his violence-prone rhetoric; yet in the middle of the explosive Lawrence strike of 1912 it was "Big Bill" himself who publicly cautioned workers to shun violence and put their hands in their pockets, for employers could not "weave cloth with the bayonets of [the] militia" (p. 70). This self-described revolutionary leader of the working class, who embodied the IWW's call for "Solidarity Forever," ultimately proved accurate his and his followers' own distrust of leaders when, in the face of government prosecutions against himself and more than one hundred comrades in 1921, he skipped bail and went, alone, into exile in the Soviet Union. In a final painful irony this antistatist syndicalist lived until his death in 1928 in a profound social vacuum, beset by alcoholism and assorted physical ailments, in the middle of Stalin's emerging Russian state. Dubofsky writes effectively of these and other juxtapositions.

The book's brevity (it is part of a series of short biographical sketches) leaves sharp images, some of which need further explanation. The depiction of the sudden rise, and equally sudden demise, of the IWW obscures the fundamental weakness of the organization: even after accounting for a particularly harsh government repression, the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of American workers paid scant attention to Haywood or his organization. But considering the book's length these are minor difficulties; the volume achieves its intent to introduce readers to the life of a fascinating and contradictory American radical.

NICK SALVATORE, *Cornell University*