CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: The Man and His Methods 1

1 “He Wants No Office!” 13

2 Hell-Raiser 38

3 A War of Conquest 77

4 Saving the World 111

5 A Hard-Boiled World 134

6 Main Street Culture Warrior 167

7 Reluctant New Dealer 187

8 Freedom Fighter 231

Epilogue 255

Notes 261

Bibliography 301

Index 311
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Crusader for Democracy
INTRODUCTION

THE MAN AND HIS METHODS

William Allen White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, was a phenomenon. He established a national reputation as the voice of the midwestern middle class through his nationally syndicated journalism, his short stories, and the novels he penned. A man with White’s talents could have joined a national newspaper at a hefty salary and made his career in Chicago, New York City, or Washington, DC. White had his share of such opportunities. For instance, the *Chicago Tribune* offered to hire him as a daily political columnist in 1903 at an annual salary of $12,000, which translates to more than $330,000 when adjusted for inflation in 2017.\(^1\) White was sometimes tempted, but he ultimately refused any offer of employment away from his hometown of Emporia and his cleverly cultivated brand as a small-town newspaper editor sharing his view from “Main Street.” The small-town image White projected was a real part of his personality, but he was also a sophisticated, well-traveled, and well-connected member of America’s elite. White rubbed elbows with local, state, and national politicians, world-renowned journalists and authors, political activists of all kinds, and every president from William McKinley to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His articles and editorials were nationally syndicated, and his magazine articles were in such demand that they earned him $1,000 apiece at the height of the muckraker era. Paradoxically, White was also an insurgent who fought a fifty-year crusade for liberal reform, usually through and sometimes against the Republican Party.\(^2\) William Allen White was a phenomenon because he was able to fuse his “Main Street” persona with his mastery of insider politics to become a seemingly ubiquitous part of American political life during the first half of the twentieth century.
White’s life work was the fight for democracy, which he reduced to the idea of equality of opportunity. To White, a democracy ought to guarantee every child a quality education and wholesome conditions, every worker the ability to provide a decent living for his or her family, every business owner or consumer the right to participate freely in the economy, and every citizen the right to good government. Although White would have preferred that people choose social justice through voluntary actions, he was a pragmatist who knew that it was necessary to use government to advance the general welfare. A wide variety of social, economic, and political reforms were included under White’s definition of “general welfare,” but one of his flaws was his almost singular focus on his own demographic of native-born, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant men. White was troubled by the fact that women, nonwhites, and urban immigrants were left out of the American community, and he was particularly courageous in fighting discrimination in his local community. However, broader systemic solutions eluded him because he could not conceive of government as a tool for achieving major social changes. Woman suffrage and the prohibition of alcohol were the only two exceptions to this rule, and his support for government action was hardly innovative since both issues had been hotly debated in Kansas since the Civil War.

Midwestern ideals of community and neighborliness lay at the heart of White’s liberal ideology, and they drove him during his half-century campaign to advance his vision for America. Such concepts inspired White to heroics at many points in his career. Midwestern ideals drove White during the Republican Party’s factional warfare of the early 1900s, and they kept him engaged in public policy despite the conservative tide that inundated the nation during the 1920s. At the same time, White’s midwestern values sometimes led him into functional alliances with conservatism when he felt culturally threatened. For instance, he served with distinction in both the conservative and liberal armies during the 1920s culture war as he fought against whichever side he felt was more threatening. White challenged the Ku Klux Klan, defended evolution, strained to understand Albert Einstein’s theories, and urged his teenage daughter not to be afraid to
come to him if she became pregnant. At the same time, he bristled against the Catholic Church; he asserted that America was a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation; and he penned articles extolling the supremacy of rural America against the corrupt cities. One reason White was never able to fully embrace President Franklin D. Roosevelt even though he endorsed a laundry list of New Deal reforms was that he could not overcome his suspicions about Roosevelt’s “slick” personality. White’s midwestern values drew him toward liberalism, but they also represented a vulnerability that could be exploited to serve conservative ends.

The Republican Party was as central to White’s political identity as his liberalism. The fact that White had been raised by his strong-willed Republican mother greatly inclined him toward the GOP, but there were practical reasons why he largely remained a lifelong Republican. First, Kansas was and remains a solidly Republican state, and anyone who wanted to have any say in state politics had to be a Republican. Second, like many Republicans, White saw the GOP as the party of middle-class, entrepreneurial, “Yankee” America, and he trusted his own demographic group with the reins of reform. In comparison, the Democratic Party had been a study in contrasts since its founding by archrivals Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. By the late nineteenth century, the Democrats were an amalgam of western farmers, urban immigrants, and the racist South. The Democrats could never be a home to White because he knew that conservative southerners could “always ask the hill-billies, ‘do you want your daughter to marry a nigger?’ and stop any argument that means progress.”

Throughout his life, White felt that the greatest threat to American democracy came from the uneducated, backward, shortsighted masses who were easily duped by smooth-talking demagogues.

Kansas was another essential part of White’s identity, beginning with his hometown of Emporia. To White, midwestern towns like Emporia exemplified America’s democratic ideals of social equality, civic-mindedness, and economic opportunity—the same notions that underpinned his concept of liberalism. In contrast, the social,
economic, and political chasm between the wealthy, the middle class, and the impoverished masses in cities like New York was so vast as to raise the danger of class stagnation. From White’s point of view, it was easier for a person to become a civic leader, an activist, or an entrepreneur in a small town than it was in the big city. Similarly, White idealized Kansas as the heir to New England’s imagined cultural purity, terming the state “the child of Plymouth Rock” because it had been settled by the Yankee pioneers who fought against slavery during the mid-nineteenth century. The state’s strong support for the Union during the Civil War had made it thoroughly Republican, and Union Army veterans dominated its political leadership until the early twentieth century. The state’s reform tradition was so engrained that Theodore Roosevelt exaggeratedly proclaimed that “Kansas was in fact founded by the Progressive Movement in the ’fifties.” To White, Kansas was both typically American and exceptionally democratic and mystical. Kansas was “a state of mind, a neurotic condition, a psychological phase, a symptom, indeed something undreamt of in your philosophy, an inferiority complex against the tricks and the manners of plutocracy, social, political, and economic.”

White’s rhetoric of the Midwest’s importance was not an idle boast, and his ideas were widespread during the era. The Midwest’s cultural significance had its expression in early twentieth-century politics. The Progressive movement had flourished in the Midwest from 1900 through 1916, led by governors such as Wisconsin’s Robert La Follette, Sr., Iowa’s Albert Cummins, Kansas’s Edward Hoch, and Missouri’s Joseph Folk. Two midwesterners led the progressive Republican insurgency against the party’s conservative wing in Congress during William H. Taft’s presidency: Kansas representative Victor Murdock and Nebraska representative George W. Norris. The Bull Moose Progressive Party relied on the Midwest as one of its primary pillars of support after the excitement of 1912 faded. Reformers survived in the Midwest during the conservative 1920s through Senator Norris; Idaho senator William E. Borah, formerly of Kansas and Illinois; and Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas. Every Republican presidential nominee from 1928 to 1944 was from the Midwest:
Iowa-born Herbert Hoover in 1928 and 1932, Kansas governor Alf Landon in 1936, and Indiana’s Wendell Willkie in 1940. Four of the six Republican National Committee chairmen from 1928 to 1944 were midwesterners, and eleven of the party’s thirteen national conventions were held in the Midwest from 1900 to 1944. White’s career coincided with a period in which the Midwest was arguably at its political and cultural apex.5

Politics has always been an interpersonal profession, and White’s ability to befriend leading figures and weave them into a universe of friends, allies, and collaborators was key to his success. White was a charismatic, cheerful, energetic, and sometimes impish soul who loved interacting with others. His small-town midwestern manner helped him charm many hard-bitten politicians, who came to value his ability to provide sincere advice generously leavened with empathy. One reason White was able to make and maintain enduring friendships with political figures was his ability to see politicians as honorable individuals as long as they respected his code of political ethics. A man could be a bare-knuckles political brawler and still be honorable as long as he avoided personal enrichment and kept the bargains he made. Politics was, to White, a story “dramatized around heroes and villains just as sport is dramatized around gladiators,” and he gauged his political friends by “how [a man] wears his clothes, how he walks, what his attitude is toward brave men and fair women, lovely gardens, wise dogs, colonial antiques, and all the notable things of the world.” Political disagreements with friends were inevitable for a man as steeped in politics as White, but he had the rare ability to be able to separate individuals and issues. Even when he disagreed vehemently with his political friends, he tried to bear in mind that “politics is always the choice between evils.”6

Journalism was another essential component of White’s success. Mechanization allowed the newspaper industry to mature into a true instrument of mass communication just as White entered the field during the late nineteenth century. White’s trajectory from newspapers to politics was common during the period, and it is easy to rattle off a list of leading politicians who were connected with the
newspaper industry. In Kansas alone, White saw fellow newspaper publishers Clyde Reed, Arthur Capper, Joseph Bristow, Edward Hoch, George Hodges, and Henry J. Allen rise to become governors and US senators. Still, he refused to follow the same course and enter politics himself, choosing to maintain strict “monastic vows against office holding.” One cannot understand White’s political significance without understanding that he sought “influence in politics rather than place or prestige.” He wanted a seat at the table or opportunities to whisper into decision makers’ ears, and it was no idle boast when White stated that his refusal to seek office had made him “one of the fellows that had to be considered in Kansas and the Middle West.” The fact that White was a journalist, an activist, or a friend rather than a rival office seeker gave him the opportunity to “stand aloof where I [can] from the more bitter conflicts and offer practicable compromise in deadlocks.” His status as a journalist allowed him to try to make his “private sentiments to a degree controlling public opinion” without being accused of being a politician with an ax to grind.  

As an activist, White was a tireless reformer who fought for change on multiple fronts. As White put it, a broad-based approach to change ensured that his “political eggs are never in one basket and I can write a book or edit the paper or play horse-around New York and be just as happy whether I win any particular election or not.” In the end, White had faith that “the curious thing about reform is that the fellow who has one idea or two or three ideas doesn't get forward with any of them but the fellow who dumps a basket full into the hopper gets a few of them out.” Changing the world required patience, and White was willing to work by small increments and suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune to advance the cause. There were times when White found himself “irked with the slow moving van of progress,” but he was careful to stay “with the procession” rather than risk getting too far ahead of what was possible. Ultimately, he believed that change was inevitable, and it came “step by step from the ground up and not from the top down.”

The editorials White wrote for his Gazette were cited far and wide as a barometer of midwestern liberal thought, but the newspaper was
also a business that allowed Publisher White to practice the ideas that Editor White preached. Managing editor Laura French and other women were employed in positions of responsibility at the Gazette, and White humorously silenced shop rumors about a coworker’s suspected homosexuality by remarking, “Hell, I never did care a damn what a man’s religion was.” White consistently editorialized that all workers had a democratic right to a living wage and a voice in the workplace, and he implemented policies making good on these ideas at the Gazette. The newspaper’s workers were unionized by the National Printers’ Union at White’s request, although he freely admitted that he “did this for selfish reasons. I was paying the highest wages in town and the union label was an asset.” A sketch of the Gazette’s wages and benefits circa 1929 proves that White’s statement was no idle boast. The Gazette employed approximately fifty workers at wages ranging from $30 to $100 per week, with a firm policy against layoffs during slack times. Every employee received two weeks of paid vacation per year, paid holidays, up to three months of paid sick leave annually, a share of an annual bonus pool that totaled $4,000, and a partially subsidized life insurance benefit. White was proud of the fact that “a man has a job-right on the Gazette,” and it is not surprising that the average employee stayed with the newspaper for thirteen years. Many of the young men White mentored, known affectionately as his “boys,” went on to become important figures in their own right: David Hinshaw, journalist and Herbert Hoover White House staffer; William S. Culbertson, lawyer, diplomat, and administrator; and Brock Pemberton, Broadway producer and founder of the Tony Award.

In his personal life, William Allen White was happily married to Sallie Lindsay for nearly fifty years. The couple were a good match: he was enthusiastic and ebullient, and she was serious and level-headed. Indeed, it was the strongly prohibitionist Sallie who was responsible for ending White’s brief experimentation with beer as a young reporter in Kansas City, Missouri. Sallie helped White suppress his occasional emotional outbursts in politics, and she provided crucial feedback as
he wrote his novels. The Whites had two children, Mary and Bill, Jr. Mary was a bright, vivacious girl who shared her father’s upbeat and dynamic personality. Sadly, she died in a tragic riding accident at the age of sixteen in 1921. Bill inherited his mother’s sobriety and his father’s writing talent, making his own journalistic name as a reporter and novelist during World War II. The White home was a happy one despite the family’s occasional tragedies, and the house itself played a supporting role in White’s career. Many a leading politician, famous artist, or reform activist made the pilgrimage to Emporia to spend an evening as White’s honored guest, including Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, and a host of lesser lights. White described the recipe for a successful evening at his home as “cabbage, turnips, carrots, onions, beets, and boiled beef with a nippy horse radish sauce which is one of Mrs. White’s culinary achievements. Stoke in from eight to twenty ounces each into four competent fiddlers and then turn them loose on old man Beethoven’s ‘c Sharp Minor Quartette,’ and you’ve got something for your money.”

White had always wanted to “be somebody,” and both he and Sallie thoroughly enjoyed their status as part of America’s journalistic and political elite. Still, this national prominence was not without cost to the couple’s health. White’s strategy of having many irons in the fire meant that he was often juggling the tasks of writing editorial copy for the Gazette, producing magazine articles and novels, corresponding with national politicians, dabbling in state and local politics, and traveling between Kansas and Chicago, Washington, DC, New York City, Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. The strain White placed on himself led to frequent “nervous breakdowns,” an ambiguous condition of dubious medical validity that was probably the social expression of stress in a rapidly modernizing world. Americans of White’s era were obsessed with nervous breakdowns, and White frequently suffered crippling breakdowns until he learned to counterbalance his personal and professional burdens with frequent vacations. Physically, White’s ample appetite led to obesity and diabetes that eventually forced his doctors to place him on a strict low-carbohydrate diet of meat, vegetables, and fruit. Mrs. White suffered
from her own maladies, including lifelong cardiovascular problems, crippling gastrointestinal disturbances, and chronic bouts of emotional depression.

The Rocky Mountains were the Whites’ lifelong refuge from their medical and emotional difficulties, and they spent part of nearly every summer at their cabin in Moraine Park, Colorado. The nearby town of Estes Park was a popular destination for Kansans fleeing brutal summertime heat, and White guessed that at least a thousand such refugees owned cabins in the Rockies. The Whites’ cabin was luxurious, featuring a bedroom, a living room, and a screened-in porch with kitchen facilities and a breathtaking mountain view. White had his office in a smaller building up the hill from the main cabin, and there were two detached sleeping cabins for guests. The fare often included mountain delicacies such as wild huckleberries and raspberries, forest mushrooms, and freshly caught trout, and White’s children took full advantage of the area’s potential for summer adventures. A number of prominent guests were entertained at the White cabin over the decades, including social reformer Jane Addams, defense attorney Clarence Darrow, and Edith Willkie, wife of 1940 Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie. Through one of the most tumultuous epochs in American history, White always had the serenity of the Rocky Mountains to soothe his soul.

Naturally, White’s prominence in American politics has attracted the attention of historians and biographers who have interpreted him through the lenses of their time. The first full biography of White was written by noted University of Chicago historian Walter Johnson beginning in the 1930s. Johnson had the benefit of White’s full cooperation, along with access to his voluminous correspondence and the \textit{Gazette’s} archives. The work was finally published in 1947, and \textit{William Allen White’s America} strongly reflected the Second World War’s spirit of national unity at a time of global crisis. Johnson’s White was a middle-class, midwestern everyman who embodied America’s inevitable drift toward liberalism. A generation passed, and White was rediscovered during the turbulent 1970s as a grassroots protest
leader in John DeWitt McKee’s *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street* (1975). McKee’s White was a deceptively amiable Progressive Era insurgent who waged a fierce campaign against the Republican establishment and faded away after World War I brought progressivism to an end. Scholars began to focus on White’s cultural philosophy by the 1990s as Americans faced globalization and yet another divisive culture war. Sally Foreman Griffith’s *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (1989) examined White as a journalist at the height of the Progressive Era, concluding that his progressivism was a defense of his local community during the rise of corporate capitalism. Similarly, Edward Argan analyzed White’s popular literature in *Too Good a Town* (1998) and placed him as the

*White’s cabin at Moraine Park, Colorado, as it appears today. The structure was considerably more rustic when he purchased it in 1912. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, HABS COLO, 35-ESPK.V, 2A-1.*
popularizer of an idealized vision of an American civilization built on small-town, midwestern community values.

The aforementioned studies are all worthy pieces of scholarship, but the fact is that White has not been fully reevaluated as a political figure in more than four decades. Furthermore, many of the studies that have been completed since Johnson published *William Allen White’s America* in 1947 have focused on White’s career during the Progressive Era. As a result, he has been somewhat pigeonholed as the voice of a fading small-town civilization, an exemplar of progressivism’s interesting but ultimately naive reformers, or as a quote-generating machine for other studies of the period. Ironically, White’s name is most widely circulated today in connection with Thomas Frank’s 2004 book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* Frank argued that cultural politics drove formerly left-leaning midwestern states like Kansas into the conservative column. He chose the same title as White’s famously conservative 1896 anti-Populist editorial to highlight this shift, which is both apt and tragic considering that White spent more than forty years as a liberal living down his moment of conservatism.13

Every generation asks its own questions of the past, and the highly charged political landscape of recent years has sparked a new wave of political biography. Historians such as Doris Kearns Goodwin and Brad Snyder have recently penned biographies that emphasize the way that prominent leaders crafted and interacted with networks of reformers. William Allen White fits this pattern as a leader, a crafter, and a member of several reform networks as he fought a lifelong campaign for democracy in an era of vicious political warfare between liberals and conservatives. White was one of the “hell-raisers” who waged an insurgency against his own party, he managed to help reshape a democracy whose basic mechanisms were initially dominated by powerful interests, and he bravely challenged ugly ideologies based on hatred and supernationalism. How did White and his cohort of Progressive Republican activists manage to organize a rebellion that threw the national Republican machine into turmoil? How did a liberal such as White manage to not only persevere during
the 1920s but also have a voice in a decade that was so conservative that it crushed many other reformers? Why was White so suspicious of a New Deal liberalism that achieved reforms he had spent decades fighting to enact? How did a small-town Kansas newspaper editor help the United States become one of the world’s leading internationalist powers? What does White’s trajectory as a midwestern liberal tell us about the fate of liberalism in the twentieth century? The battles White waged, the victories he won, the defeats he suffered, and the ideas that inspired him when his cause seemed futile are as relevant to Americans today as they were a century ago.