Democracy in Vermont

Small is beautiful in the Green Mountain state.

By Bill Kauffman

“While many seek the truth by scan-
ning galaxies through powerful tel-
escopes, my eyes have been de-
duced to a microscope-looking down,
not up, inward, not outward. Amer-
ica has often seemed transfixed by
big. I am captivated by small.”

— Frank Bryan

FRANK BRYAN IS THAT RARE POLITICAL
scientist who can begin his statisti-
duplicated tome by describing his wife as
“the sexiest wrench in the galaxy” and
enliven whole with footnotes recount-
ing his first gun, cows he has milked, get-
ing best up in a dance hall over a girl,
and the abandoned farms of his Vermont
boyhood: “the only trace of the old
McEachern place is in a faraway con-
nor of my heart.”

He once ran afloat on the town ordi-
nances of Starkboro, where he lives in
a converted beer camp on Big Hollow
Road, by having 20 junker Chevrettes in
his yard. (As a communitarian, not a
libertarian, he disposed of these parts-cars
with only moderate grumbling.) Bryan is
a legendary character at the University
of Vermont, where he teaches political
science: he is the horned-handed son
of toil who does regression analysis, the
regular-guy intellectual who prefers the
company of “working-class people... the
old Vermonters.” And now the impres-
sible Bryan has made a major contribu-
tion to his field (and his country, which
is Vermont) with Real Democracy (Uni-
versity of Chicago Press), his magnum
opus, the most searching and sympa-
thetic book ever written about the town-
meeting democracy of New England.
The book is a veritable four-leaf clover of
academia: a witty work of political
science written from a defiantly rural
populist point of view.

I met Frank Bryan for breakfast at the
Owls Diner on Bank Street, the work-
ing-class Democratic eatery in down-
town Burlington that for 65 years has
been owned and operated by the Lines
family, making it an oasis of family own-
ership in the desert of Applebees
and Olive Gardens.

Howard Dean may be the best-known
living Vermonter, but Dean, Bryan notes,
is a cosmopolitan flanlender who was
“raised in an environment as completely
estranged from town meetings as one
can imagine.” Though Dean displayed
apocalyptic heterodoxy in his presiden-
tial campaign, he embodies little of the
“curious mixture of radicalism, popu-
larism, and conservatism” that Bryan
says has defined Vermont politics since
the days when Anti-Masonic and abolition
were in vogue.

If the Green Mountains had a face, it
would be Frank Bryan. He is the real
Vermont, the enduring Vermont, not the
picture postcard, not the New York
Times reader in her air-conditioned
summer home, but the Vermont of
Robert Frost (a Grover Cleveland
Democrat who placed his faith in “insub-
ordinate Americans”) and crankily
iconic Sen. George Aiken, who once
explained that “some folks just naturally
love the mountains, and like to live up
among them where freedom of thought
and action is logical and inherent.”

“My mother raised me a Democrat.
Vermont raised me a Democrat. This
book springs from a life of fighting the
discrimination between the two,” writes
Bryan in Real Democracy. Son of a
single mom, who worked in the mills,
Bryan has that “redneck chip on my
shoulder” essential to a healthy, authen-
tic populism. His Class of ’59 at New-
bury High totaled seven, which led to his
politics: “Keep it small. The basketball
isn’t good, but everybody gets to play,”
as he told the Vermont Quarterly.

After graduation, “I went off to school
and heard about how poor and destitute
and dumb people like me were because
of the size of my community.” One
summer he hiked Mount Mansfield
with his brother, who was studying for
the priesthood. “I went up that mountain
a pretty Liberal Democrat and came down
a Goldwater conservative because my
brother convinced me that the Demo-
crats were going to destroy the small
towns; they didn’t care about small
farms or town meeting.”

Bryan has since shed his illusions
about the commitment of Republicans
to any small-town value not reducible to
the bottom line on an annual corporate
report. The modern GOP is the party of
war and Wal-Mart (four of which deface
Vermont, the last state to have been
infected by the Arizona Plague), Bryan
now calls himself a "decentralist com-
mitarian" whose heart "is with the
small is beautiful crowd."
Yet he is no de-ey-eyed idealizer of The People. "Jefferson said rural people are the chosen people of God—that’s a bunch of crap. But forced intimacy is good for society; it makes us tolerant.
The reason I’ll stop and help you out of a snow bank on Big Hollow Road isn’t because I particularly like you. But I might see you tomorrow at the store and have to explain why I didn’t. And I expect reciprocity!"

Washington-New York conservatives despise Vermont for its "liberalism," though I cannot see how Bernie Sanders is any more destructive of American liberties than, say, Dick Cheney. Or perhaps they hate Frank Bryan's state because, lacking any sense of place or local loyalties themselves, they fear communities organized on a human scale. Burlington, Vermont's largest city, has fewer than 40,000 residents, and the state leads the nation in the percentage of its population living in towns of under 2,500.

Frank Bryan calls himself a "Vermont patriot," and one is reminded of Chester- ton's dictum that a patriot never boasts of the largeness of his country but rather of its littleness. As he and John McClaugherty wrote in The Vermont Papers (1990), their refreshing radical proposal for devolution of state government: "Vermont matters most because it is small, not in spite of it."

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"The proposals that Vermont secede from the United States and Kingdom County secede from Vermont were moved and passed, as they had been annually since 1763, when the Green Mountain State first joined the Union. These were the only two measures the people of the Nation ever agreed upon unanimously."

—Howard Frank Mosher
Northern Borders

Mosher, Bryan’s favorite Vermont novelist, depicts town meeting as a blend of cussedness and community, radicalism and renewal. Elsewhere Mosher has written of Northern Vermont as being "full of fiercely antiauthoritarian, independent-minded individualists" for whom "independence, rooted in local land ownership and local government, seems to have remained the chief objective." Ecco Frank Bryan.

Bryan views town meeting as the paradigm of this independence. His research into its workings and meaning has been his "life’s work," as Harvard's Jane Mansbridge has said, Real Democracy is the result.

Every March since 1969, Professor Bryan has sent his students at St. Michael's College and later the University of Vermont to the school gym, auditorium, church cellars, and fire stations of the 236 Vermont towns holding annual meetings at which the citizens present—about 20 percent of a town's population, on average—vote on budgets, elect officials, levy taxes, and otherwise decide whatever governmental business has not been usurped by the central authorities in Montpelier and Washington, D.C.

Bryan's sample is enormous almost 1,500 town meetings "encompassful 238,603 acts of participation by 63,140 citizens in 210 towns." This mountain of data is vast and unique, for as Bryan notes incredulously, "No article on town meeting has ever been published in a major political science journal. Never..."

"We know much more about the Greek democracy of 2,500 years ago than we do about real democracy in America today."

Why the neglect and reverence among political scientists? "They don't trust common people," he says of his colleagues. "They were trained by professors who were trained by people who were terrified by fascism and the tyranny of the majority."
Vermont doubtfully gave Alf Landon three of his eight electoral votes in the presidential campaign of 1936, and on Town Meeting Day of that same year her gallant citizens rejected by a vote of 42,318 to 39,978 the Green Mountain Parkway, a federal proposal to build a freeway through the Green Mountains, defying them in the service of faster travel and car-window tourism.

Frank Bryan calls the defeat of the Green Mountain Parkway "the most democratic expression of environmental and natural consciousness in American history." I suppose that today's Bellows Falls conservativewould revile Vermont for spurning national greatness, progress, and the panny has planned. The result would be the Vermont desired by many of the newest immigrants: no old Vermonters, but plenty of nature parks.

Frank Bryan describes the two waves of post-World War II immigration to his state: the first suburban, the second multigenerational. "The first were hippies who came for ideological reasons; they wanted to live small, get a horse or cow. They bought chainsaws and wounded themselves. But they've done a lot to preserve town meeting and local government because they were real lefties."

The "post-1960s influx," by contrast, "is much more upscale; let's go to the cleanest, safest state in America and get

**BRYAN SUMS UP THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL DIRECT DEMOCRACY:**

**"KEEP JURISDICTIONS SMALL AND GIVE THEM REAL THINGS TO DO."**

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gracious gift of asphalt proffered by that modern conservative hero, FHWA. (Bryan later opposed, unsuccessfully, the indiction of the Interstate Highway System upon northern Vermont.)

The rejection of the Green Mountain Parkway, which Bryan sees as a microcosm of its defiance and radical in its implications, reveals an old Vermont that is green and turbulent, little and rebellious.

I am reminded of "Where the Rivers Flow North" (1960), Vermont filmmaker Jay Craven's fine adaptation of Howard Frank Mosher's story of a book-baited Northern Vermont logger and his Indian common-law wife, played com brio by Rip Torn and Tattoo Carol. The leased land on which the logger's family has lived and died for generations is bought by the Northern Power Co., which intends to flood it for a dam. The logger, declaring that he will not "budge off my land," tries instead to cut down the trees and, not incidentally, run the "nature park" the power company house with a tidy view. They want to preserve the ambience of small —no old Chevelles in the yard, cows are okay as long as they don't s—too much—but they want to use the politics of centralized authority. They don't care who's living here or how we make decisions as long as Vermont looks like a theme park. They want to be in Vermont but they don't want to live in Vermont. We spend tons of money to preserve old farm buildings, but there's nothing like that to preserve town meeting or the citizen legislature or the two-year term for governor (which is under bipartisan assault) or the democratic values that created [Vermont] in the first place."

Bryan notes the social gulf between the old Vermont and the new. "The people that had the [anti-civvies union] 'Take Back Vermont' signs were the people that created the image that these new guys want: they exist them. When a farmer stands up at a town meeting, the flatlanders all go, 'It's a farmer!'—like
God is here. But do they invite them over for tea? No. They don't socialize with them."

(Civil unions between same-sex couples, Vermont's latest claim to political particularity, "didn't have much impact," says Bryan. "The Right thought it was something's going to hell, we'll be the haven, but nothing like that happened." The way the unions were achieved, however, by a "court-directed legislative carve-in"—affronted Bryan's democratic sensibilities. "We overturned 2500 years of Judeo-Christian tradition in three months without an election. The people who backed civil unions were so intolerant of those who didn't; the professional people couldn't understand why the rednecks were all bent out of shape.")

The Take Back Vermonters were acting in a long Vermont tradition of resistance to centralized tyranny. The state's political genius was a kind of sturdy Jeffersonianism—without the stain of slavery. Vermont learned early the virtues of states' rights when it defied the Fugitive Slave Act. Vermont would notreturn a slave without a "Bill of Sale from the Almighty" declared state Supreme Court Justice Theopolis Harrington.

Vermont remained an independent republic, outside the nascent union, from 1777 to 1791, and imaginative Vermonters are asking, why not again? In 1996, Bryan traveled Vermont with State Chief Justice John Dooley debating the state's secession from the union. (Bryan argued the affirmative.) He is "very sympathetic" to the green economist Thomas Naylor's campaign for a "Second Vermont Republic"—that is, an independent Vermont, detached from the United States, as Naylor proposes in The Vermont Manifesto (2000).

"When I put the secession argument to the test intellectually, I can't think of a reason not to, even economically," says Bryan, who nevertheless opposes secession for perhaps the only legitimate reason: sentiment. "I couldn't sit around and let a bunch of crazy Vermonters like me tear down the American flag. My heart would break."

The regionalist who actually lives in the place he loves is often given to alternating fits of hyperromanticism and utter despair. Bryan sounds the occasional platangent note, but in the main he radiates optimism: a quixotic technophobe, he credits computer technology with making possible "a dramatic decentralization of lifestyle and culture."

"People are living and working in the same place," he says. "They don't have to drive to a centralized workplace, which was the great dislocation of the 20th century." The divorce of work and home visited upon us horrors ranging from daycare to the Interstate Highway System; its reunion may bear fruit delicious, including the revitalization of local democracy.

In any event, Frank Bryan is in Vermont, for better or worse. As a patriot, he stands on what he stands for. With Real Democracy, he has given his state, and us outsiders as well, the most detailed and affectionate portrait ever painted of town meeting, which is, as Bryan says, "where you learn to be a good citizen." His book is also an act of love. It shows Vermont how to stay Vermont. For as Bryan avers, "The only way to save Vermont is to preserve our democratic institutions."

Bryan likes to quote Jack London: "I would rather my shack should burn out in a brilliant blaze than be stifled in dry rot." These fires you see lighting the Green Mountain sky are Frank Bryan's bonfire, which burns so brilliantly because its kindling is so dear to him, so dear and so wonderfully life-giving small. —

Bill Kaufman's most recent book, Dispatches from the Muddog Gazette, is now out in paperback from Picador.