

Bye Bye Miss American Empire

Made in Vermont: Meet Frank Bryan, the Green Mountain Independence Movement's Avatar

Bill Kauffman

Bill Kauffman, resident of New York state, is the author of *Bye Bye Miss American Empire* (Chelsea Green, 2010), a book that explores the unaffiliated secession movement in the U.S. With the author's permission, Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence has been publishing excerpts from the book focusing on Vermont's participation and leadership in secession from the U.S. Here, we present our fifth and final installment from Kauffman's book.

While many seek the truth by scanning galaxies through powerful telescopes, my eyes have been glued to a microscope—looking down, not up, inward, not outward. America has often seemed transfixed by big. I am captivated by small.

—FRANK BRYAN

We have come back, time and again, to Vermont, our vivid little inspiration, the state that is not island or peninsula or archipelago or Francophone or Polynesian and yet breathes independence like no other of its 49 sisters. We will speak more of the Second Vermont Republic, but just as William Carlos Williams said there are no ideas but in things, I believe that there are no ideas but in people, and who better to introduce us to Vermont than its native-son avatar and intellectual and my candidate for its first president?

Frank Bryan is that rare political scientist who can begin one statistics-dappled tome by describing his wife as “the sexiest wench in the galaxy” and enliven another with footnotes recounting his first gun, cows he has milked, getting heat 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 corner of my heart.”

**Frank Bryan is the real Vermont, the enduring Vermont,
the Vermont of Robert Frost and George Aiken, who 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.”**

He once ran afoul of the town ordinances of Starksboro, where he lives in a converted deer camp on Big Hollow Road, by having 20 junker Chevettas in his yard. (As a communitarian, not a libertarian, he disposed of these parts-cars with only moderate grumhling.) Bryan is a legendary character at the University of Vermont, where he teaches political science: He is the horny-handed son of toil who does regression analysis, the regular-guy intellectual who prefers the company of “working-class people . . . the old Vermonters.” The irrepressible Bryan made a major contribution to his field (and his country, which is Vermont) with *Real Democracy* (2004),

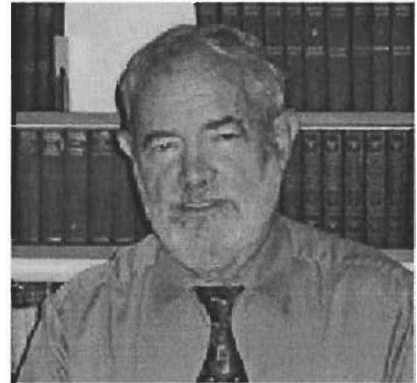
his magnum opus, the most searching and sympathetic book ever written about the town-meeting democracy of New England. The book is a veritable four-leaf clover of academia: a witty work of political science written from a defiantly rural populist point of view. If we are going to conclude this book [*Bye Bye Miss American Empire*] with a look at the Second Vermont Republic, the sophisticated, down-home, and generously localist secessionist band in the Green Mountain State, we need first to meet the archetypal – the exemplary – Vermonter.

I met Frank Bryan over breakfast at the Oasis Diner on Bank Street, the working-class Democratic eatery in downtown Burlington that for 50-plus years, until its sale in 2007, was owned and operated by the Lines family, making it an oasis of family ownership in the desert of Applebee's and Olive Gardens.

Former governor Howard Dean may be the best-known living political Vermonter, but Dean, Bryan notes, is a cosmopolitan flatlander who was “raised in an environment as completely estranged from town meetings as one can imagine.” Although Dean has displayed spasmodic heterodoxy, notably in his 2004 presidential campaign, he does not embody the “curious mixture of radicalism, populism, and conservatism” that Bryan says has defined Vermont politics since the days when Anti-Masonry 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 “insubordinate Americans”)

and craggily iconic Republican senator George Aiken, who 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 dissonance between the two,” writes Bryan in *Real Democracy*. Son of a single mom who worked in the mills, Bryan has that “redneck's chip on my shoulder” essential to a healthy, authentic populism. His Class of '59 at Newbury High totaled seven, which led to his politics: “Keep it small. The basketball isn't good,



UVM political scientist, author, and sometime *Vermont Commons* contributor Frank Bryan, who wrestles with the nuances of Vermont Independence. FRANK BRYAN

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 Moosilauke with his brother, who was studying for the priesthood. “I went up that mountain a Kennedy Democrat and came down a Goldwater conservative because my brother convinced me that the Democrats 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 Arkansas Plague). Bryan now calls himself a “decentralist communitarian” whose heart “is with the small is beautiful crowd.” Yet he is no dewy-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 hank 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, Rudy Giuliani. 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 forty thousand residents, and the state leads the nation in the percentage of its population living in towns of under twenty-five hundred.

continued on page 14

Bye Bye Miss American Empire, continued from page 13

Frank Bryan calls himself a "Vermont patriot." One recalls G. K. Chesterton's dictum that a patriot hoists never of the largeness of his country but rather of its littleness. As Bryan and John McClaughry wrote in *The Vermont Papers* (1989), their blueprint for a devolutionary overhaul 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 1791, when the Green Mountain State first joined the Union. These were the only two measures the people of Lost Nation ever agreed upon unanimously.

—HOWARD FRANK MOSHER,
Northern Borders (1994)

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." *Ecce Frank Bryan*.

Bryan views town meeting as the palladium of this independence. His research into its workings and meaning has been his "life's work," says Harvard's Jane Mansbridge. *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 gyms, auditoriums, 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



Bryan with a team of oxen. Rooted in Vermont. FRANK BRYAN

whichever 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 "encompassing 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 twenty-five hundred years ago than we do about real democracy in America today."

Why the neglect and nescience among political scientists?

"They don't trust common people," he says of his confreres. "They were trained by professors who were trained by people who were terrified by fascism and the 'tyranny of the majority.'"

Transient suburbanites and hyper-mobile city dwellers fear nothing so much as the unlettered rural man with a voice and a meaningful vote. They cannot see that the diffusion of power inherent in town meeting is the best defense against tyranny. Bryan quotes Goldwater speechwriter turned Wobbly Karl Hess, who "once said that Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany is a horror; Adolf Hitler at a town meeting would be an asshole."

Yes, localized direct democracy is majoritarian, but the citizen unhappy with a law may appeal to her neighbors, who are often kin or lifelong friends. At the national level, however, she is just a single vote in a mass of anonymous millions – not even a brick in the wall. A Vermonter who dislikes his town's junk-car ordinance can remonstrate with his landmen; a Vermonter who dislikes the Wall Street bailout or the Iraq War can shut up or get drunk, but he can't get within a Free Speech Zone of Barack Obama.

Bryan's central finding is that "real democracy works better in small places – dramatically better." The smaller the town, the higher the percentage of citizens who participate in town meeting. The only other variable with any potency is the presence of controversial items on the agenda. If town meeting is waning, as pulseless technocrats often claim, it is because "Vermont towns have steadily been losing the authority to deal with controversial issues." Voting up or down on the purchase of a snowplow is fine, but for grassroots democracy to thrive we must restore to small places control over education, welfare, and economic regulation.

"Issues are absolutely essential," Bryan stresses. "Liberals think you go to town meeting because you have a civic duty. There's some of that, but no one is damn fool enough to give up a spring day [for that]. But if their kids' education is up for grabs, they'll damn well be there."

Bryan sums up the key to successful direct democracy: "Keep jurisdictions small and give them real things to do."

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And where do I live by preference, when I am not teaching? Vermont. Why? Because it is, in most of the ways of freedom and space, more like the West I grew up in than most of the Contemporary West is.

—WALLACE STEGNER, 1971

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Since the 1930s Vermont has attracted rusticating intellectuals who "bought abandoned farms and stayed from last frost to first," Bryan jokes. Vermont doughtily gave landslide-loser 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 42,318–30,987 the Green Mountain Parkway, a federal proposal to build a freeway through the Green Mountains, despoiling 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 consciousness in American history." I suppose that today's Beltway conservatives would revile Vermont for spurning national greatness, progress, and the gracious gift of asphalt. (Bryan later opposed, unsuccessfully, the infliction of the Interstate Highway System upon northern Vermont. The Vermont writer Castle Freeman, Jr., as fine a novelist as you'll find anywhere, described I-91 as a "serpent, vast, corrupting worm, fell messenger, incubus – a soul-harlot lewdly lying beside the chaste green hills.")

The rejection of the Green Mountain Parkway, which Frank Bryan sees as mythic in its defiance and radical in its implications, reveals an old Vermont that is green and truculent, little and rebellious. I am reminded of *Where the Rivers Flow North* (1993), Vermont filmmaker Jay Craven's fine adaptation of Howard Frank Mosher's story of a hook-handed Northern Vermont logger and his Indian common-law wife, played con brio by Rip Torn and Tantoo Cardinal. 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 be "brided off my land," tries instead to cut down the trees and, not incidentally, ruin the "nature park" the power company has planned. Northern Power would deliver 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 salutary, the second malignant. "The first were hippies who came for ideological reasons: They wanted to live small, get a horse or cow. They bought chain saws and wounded themselves. But they've done a lot to preserve town meeting and local government because they were real lefties."

The "post-1980s influx," by contrast, "is much more upscale: Let's go to the cleanest, safest state in America and get a trophy house with a nice view. They want to preserve the ambience of small – no old Chevettes in the yard; cows are okay as long as they don't shit 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



Frank Bryan and his oxen marching in the Bristol July Independence parade. FRANK BRYAN

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-gay-civil-unions] TAKE BACK VERMONT signs were the people that created the image that these new guys want: They extol 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 "didn't have much impact," says Bryan. "The right thought everything'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 cave-in" – affronted Bryan's democratic sensibilities. "We overturned twenty-five hundred 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." They were bent further out of shape by Vermont's 2009 enshrinement of gay marriage.)

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 stony Jeffersonianism – without the stain of slavery. Vermont learned early the virtues of states' rights when it defied the Fugitive Slave Act. Vermont would not return a slave without a "Bill of Sale from the Almighty," declared state Supreme Court Justice Theophilus Harrington in 1804.

Vermont remained an independent republic, outside the nascent union, from 1777 to 1791, and imaginative Vermonters are asking why not go out again? In 1990 Bryan traveled the state with Vermont Supreme Court Justice John Dooley debating secession from the union. Bryan, who argued the affirmative, is "very sympathetic" to the campaign for a Second Vermont Republic.

"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 opposed secession for several years 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." But in the intervening years the rest of America broke his heart, and he is with the secessionists today, if reluctantly.

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The regionalist who actually lives in the place he loves is often given to alternating fits of lachrymose romanticism and utter despair. Bryan sounds the occasional plangent note, but in the main he radiates optimism: a quondam 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 twentieth century." The divorce of work and home visited upon us horrors ranging from day care 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 gave his state, and us outlanders as well, the most detailed and affectionate portrait ever painted of town meeting, which is, says Bryan, "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, who said, Neil Youngishly: "I would rather my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled in dry rot." Those 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-givingly small. •