

The American Commonwealth, The: Two Volume CL Set

James Bryce

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#4026659 in Books Liberty Fund, Inc. 1995-11-30Original language:EnglishPDF # 2 9.31 x 4.28 x 6.39l, 6.53 #File Name: 08659711611711 pages | File size: 23.Mb

James Bryce : The American Commonwealth, The: Two Volume CL Set before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The American Commonwealth, The: Two Volume CL Set:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Four StarsBy peter prizerWell-written British perspective on turn-of-the-century America and its politics.47 of 50 people found the following review helpful. Basic text of American government, often referred to, seldom read.By EpopsJames Bryce's "The American Commonwealth" is a basic text of American government and politics, one of three such texts, the others being Hamilton, Madison, and Jay The

Federalist Papers (Signet Classics), and de Tocqueville Democracy In America (Complete). These three works, two by foreigners, form the groundwork of a basic understanding of the American system of government. Such an understanding is basic to good citizenship. The lack of such an understanding is sadly demonstrated every day by America's journalists, professors, politicians, and average citizens. Reading Bryce's "Commonwealth" seems a formidable task at the beginning, since it is two volumes with a total of over 1600 pages. Yet once you begin, Lord Bryce's style is so natural, almost conversational, and the material so interesting to anyone with the slightest interest in American history and politics (and shouldn't that include every American citizen?), that it is actually a very easy book to read. Bryce was Scottish, born in Belfast, Ireland. He became an attorney and a professor of law at Oxford, then a member of Parliament. He was Ambassador to the United States from 1907 to 1913, became a viscount in 1914. He was very well-traveled and well-known in the US, about as well-qualified as anyone could be to write a description of the American form of government. Because of his reputation as a friend of America he had an important influence on the US entry into World War One on the Allied side. The first volume covers the national and state governments, the second volume covers the party system, public opinion, and various aspects of American political and social life. The first edition was published in 1888, and it was last revised in 1914. Over the years Bryce made many revisions as his observations and knowledge of America broadened and deepened. Bryce explains exactly how American government works. A listing of some of the more significant chapters will give an idea of the subjects covered: Chapter 3: The Origins of the Constitution Chapter 8: Why Great Men are not Chosen President Chapter 33: The Interpretation of the Constitution Chapter 34: The Development of the Constitution by Usage Chapter 53: Political Parties and Their History Chapter 78: How Public Opinion Rules in America Chapter 84: The Tyranny of the Majority Chapter 85: The Fatalism of the Multitude Of special interest are three appendices. The first is a review by Bryce of the predictions of Hamilton and de Tocqueville. The second is a review of "The American Commonwealth" written in 1889 by Woodrow Wilson when Wilson was a professor of political science at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. The third is a review by Lord Acton. Bryce believed that had the Constitution been put to a popular vote in 1787 it would never have passed. As it was, the only reason the Constitution gained popular support was because of the fear of foreign powers. As Bryce puts it, in the years following the Revolution and the collapse of the Articles of Confederation, Americans felt very vulnerable to foreign intervention: "The fear of foreign interference, the sense of weakness, both at sea and on land, against the military monarchies of Europe, was constantly before the mind of American statesmen, and made them anxious to secure at all hazards a national government capable of raising an army and navy, and of speaking with authority on behalf of the new republic." His comments on the relationship between the Constitution, the Supreme Court, and the American people are very timely. Of the Presidency he says, "The president has developed a capacity for becoming, in moments of national peril, something like a Roman dictator." His description of the development of the political parties is equally timely, and is the best I have ever read. Some final quotations from Bryce: "Someone has said that the American government and Constitution are based on the theology of Calvin and the philosophy of Hobbes. This at least is true, that there is a hearty Puritanism in the view of human nature which pervades the instrument of 1787. It is the work of men who believed in original sin, and were resolved to leave open for transgressors no door which they could possibly shut. Compare this spirit with the enthusiastic optimism of the Frenchmen of 1789. It is not merely a difference of race temperaments; it is a difference of fundamental ideas." He ends on this pessimistic note, echoing Benjamin Franklin: "To expect any form of words, however weightily conceived, with whatever sanctions enacted, permanently to restrain the passions and interests of men is to expect the impossible. Beyond a certain point, you cannot protect the people against themselves any more than you can, to use a familiar American expression, lift yourself from the ground by your own bootstraps." Highly recommended in this authoritative and economical edition.

In Democracy in America (1835) the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville interpreted American society through the lens of democratic political theory. A half-century later the Scotsman James Bryce examined "the institutions and the people of America as they are." Bryce presented his findings in *The American Commonwealth*, first published in London in three volumes in 1888. This new Liberty Fund two-volume edition is based on the updated third edition of 1941, which encompassed all the changes, corrections, and additions that Bryce entered into the previous editions. Its expanded appendix includes Bryce's 1887 essay, "The Predictions of Hamilton and De Tocqueville," and contemporaneous (1889) reviews of *The American Commonwealth* by Woodrow Wilson and Lord Acton. The great merit of Bryce's work is that it is based on close observation of the actual operation of American political institutions, including political parties and municipal and state governments. Consequently, Bryce provides what Professor Gary McDowell describes as "a grand atlas of American politics and society." Indeed, Bryce was able to discern enduring characteristics of American society and politics. Therefore, as Robert Nisbet has written, "we still go to Bryce for piquant and cogent answers to the questions of why great men are not chosen presidents and why the best men do not go into politics in America." James Bryce (1838-1922) was a British jurist, historian, and statesman. From 1907 to 1913 he was England's ambassador to the United States. Gary L. McDowell is the Tyler Haynes Interdisciplinary Professor of Leadership Studies, Political Science, and Law at the University of Richmond in Virginia. From 1992 to

2003 he was the Director of the Institute of United States Studies in the University of London.

About the Author Gary L. McDowell is a Professor in the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, where he holds the Tyler Haynes Interdisciplinary Chair of Leadership Studies, Political Science, and Law. He is the author or editor of ten books, including *Equity and the Constitution: The Supreme Court, Equitable Relief and Public Policy*; *Curbing the Courts: The Constitution and the Limits of Judicial Power*; *Justice vs. Law: Courts and Politics in American Society* (with Eugene W. Hickok, Jr.); and *Friends of the Constitution: Writings of the 'Other' Federalists* (edited with Colleen Sheehan). In addition to his teaching appointments, he has served as the Director of the Office of the Bicentennial of the Constitution at the National Endowment for the Humanities, Associate Director of Public Affairs at the United States Department of Justice and chief speechwriter to United States Attorney General Edwin Meese III, and Director of the Institute of United States Studies in the University of London.