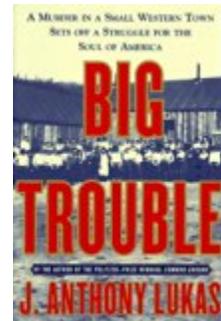


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

J. Anthony Lukas. *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 880 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80858-1.

Reviewed by Kenneth R. Dvorak (Bowling Green University)
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Interested in murder? Political conspiracies? Social revolutionaries? Government repression? High powered political and legal personalities? Secret agents and double agents? Potential class warfare? A murder trial deemed the trial of the century? *Big Trouble* has this and more in J. Anthony Lukas expert examination of the 1905 murder of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg. Following his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Common Ground*, Lukas provides an excellent account of how a small town murder sets off a “struggle for the soul of America.”

In a riveting opening chapter the reader becomes introduced to rural Caldwell, Idaho, and its former state governor, now managing the families local bank. Almost overnight, Steunenberg becomes associated with a new breed of Western pioneers, the rising entrepreneurs of big business and finance. As he concludes his final working day, Frank leaves the bank for home, slowly walking through town. Later, witnesses said that the former governor seemed preoccupied seemingly uninterested in the upcoming Christmas holidays. Entering the front gate of his home a horrific explosion blows Steunenberg into eternity. The resulting uproar at the murder of Caldwell’s leading citizen leads to a series of events engulfing government officials from Caldwell to the White House.

Fraught with tension the investigation of Steunenberg’s murder takes on a life of its own. Within days the mysterious drifter, Harry Orchard, is arrested for Steunenberg’s murder. Leading the investigation is the infamous Pinkerton detective, James McParland of Molly Maquire fame, who insists that Orchard is a pawn of organized labor. In Orchard’s confession he implicates the leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, “Big

Bill” Haywood, George Pettibone, and Charles Moyer. Orchard tells his captors that the WFM and its leaders were part of a conspiracy to kill Steunenberg for his actions while governor in stopping a miners insurrection in northern Idaho in 1899.

For McParland tracking down the WFM trio posed a problem since neither of them were in Idaho at the time of Steunenberg’s killing. To get them into Idaho to face punishment becomes the primary mission of McParland and a thrilling story of intrigue and mystery. Lukas is at his best in describing the kidnapping and arrest of these men, retelling in detail how McParland masterminded the entire operation. Spirited out of Denver in the dead of night, on a private train, the trio arrives in Caldwell, their abduction almost completely unnoticed.

Their formal arraignment in court began one of the West’s most famous criminal trials. On one side stood organized labor, represented by the WFM; standing opposite were wealthy capitalists supported by officials in the local courthouse to the White House. It is here that the central theme of *Big Trouble* emerges as Lukas examines the potential for open class warfare.

Big Trouble examines Steunenberg’s murder from differing perspectives, allowing the author to introduce a cast of characters and motives rivaling that of the O.J. Simpson murder trial. The trial of Haywood, Pettibone and Moyer drew the interest of the powerful and famous. Lukas does not disappoint, introducing a long list of personalities associated with the trial. Clarence Darrow, the darling of the Socialists, is the lead defense attorney. Across the aisle was the prosecutor, William J. Borah, whose daring exploits in the courtroom rival those in the boardrooms and bedrooms of the socially promi-

ment. James McParland, hidden out of sight, maneuvers behind the scenes trying to influence the outcome of the trial.

Others appear and disappear at the trial including President Theodore Roosevelt, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Gifford Pinchot the nation's first "forester," Idaho governor Frank Robert Gooding, Ethel Barrymore the famous actress, and a young Walter Johnson just beginning his baseball career. William Allen White makes an appearance as does Eugene Debs the Socialist candidate for president. Also making appearances are Margaret Dreier Robins, head of the Womens Trade Union League, and Charles Siringo, the famous "Cowboy Detective" and Pinkerton agent. Lukas also examines the role of the press at the trial, examining in detail the famous reporters of the era, who traveled to Caldwell in search of the "big story."

The reader will enjoy Lukas' painstaking recreation of the social and cultural turmoil America found itself in during the trial. Lukas chronicles these tensions that had begun in the late nineteenth century and now found expression in a small town in Idaho. Provided as vignettes the author crafts an expansive view of American life at the turn of the century. One of the best is Lukas' discussion and analysis of the mining turmoil of the 1880s and 1890s.

The author provides a stunning portrayal of hunger and exploitation met by the miners in the Coeur d'Alene

region of Washington state, in Colorado, Utah, and Idaho. The resulting bitter fighting between miners and strike breakers, the murders of company men and the destruction of mining equipment, fueled a hatred between economic classes little understood in other regions of the country. Government repression of the striking miners only increased the hatred between the miners, the mine owners and the federal government. The use of the army's famous Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment (known as "The Buffalo Soldiers") heightened an already explosive situation. These and many other stories are interwoven in this expertly researched book.

As the trial neared its end, only in the final chapters does the reader encounter a list of possible reasons for the trial of Big Bill Haywood and his cohorts. Who was to blame for the murder of ex-governor Frank Steunenberg? Was it the failure of the state in not procuring enough evidence? Did the WFM bribe the jury as many speculated? Could other circumstances and motivations have had a bearing on the trial's outcome? In his historical narrative, Lukas provides thrilling answers to these questions. As the trial played out in the nation's newspapers, boardrooms, labor halls, saloons, and legislative halls the issues to surface in this small, western town foreshadowed the struggle for Americas soul.

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