

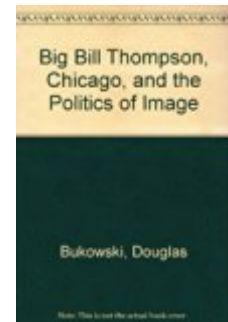
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Douglas Bukowski. *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago, and the Politics of Image*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 273 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06668-9; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02365-1.

Reviewed by Dick Simpson (University of Illinois at Chicago)
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Douglas Bukowski's *Big Bill Thompson* is of interest to historians, political scientists, and advanced students of history. Bukowski in this biography sets out to correct popular and journalistic misrepresentations of Chicago's most colorful mayor. These previous inaccurate accounts have been perpetuated in most biographies and histories of the period.

The difficulty in obtaining an accurate portrait of Big Bill, the Builder Mayor, is that he was a theatrical, larger-than-life, demagogue who changed his image and his positions on issues several times during his long career.

As Bukowski explains, "The legend himself does not allow for easy revision. Time has yielded new sources, yet nothing to flesh out Thompson's personal life or two nervous breakdowns...He spent a life talking (as any demagogue would) without revealing anything of himself" (p. 1). Bukowski is able to utilize new sources such as the federal Freedom of Information material which he obtained to question previously asserted "facts" and conclusions about Mayor Thompson. Bukowski applies careful historical scholarship and judgment in his biography which was often missing in previous attempts.

Two weaknesses emerge, however. While historians like Steven Erie and Roger Biles praise Bukowski's "lively style" in book jacket quotes, I find this book drily and academically written, more concerned with professional disputes than in telling a clear story of Big Bill's amazing career. The reader does not get as vivid a picture of the mayor as they might.

The second related weakness is that the quotes from Big Bill himself are not more than a sentence or two while in real life his monologues such as the one when

he staged a "debate" between himself and two white rats which he carried on stage to represent his political opponents are priceless political theater. His speeches on many occasions provide a great insight into the period, the politics, and the mayor himself. The biography would be better for most readers if Big Bill spoke more often for himself.

Bukowski's biography is best for his careful judgments, such as his observation on page 134 that, "Entering into the last half of his second term, Thompson held parts of a machine he was incapable of assembling." Or consider Bukowski's assessment of the mayor's relationship to illicit activities: "For Thompson crime was simply a given, to be handled according to public outcry or apathy and—always—to be exploited for political advantage" (p. 159).

Bukowski attempts to show how Thompson created most of the elements of a machine later to be copied and perfected later by Democrats. But instead of precinct work, Thompson finally depended upon oratory, showmanship, and symbols to gain political victories. In the end, these were not enough to sustain Big Bill's power in the face of the depression.

Bukowski in his biography reveals new information, including disclosures that the Justice Department kept files on Thompson and bugged his hotel suite during World War I, that the Harding White House aided Thompson in a libel suit against the Chicago Tribune, and that Thompson was not the political puppet of Al Capone. These corrections and additions to the biography of Thompson are important.

Bukowski makes an important contribution to the

sober reconsideration of Mayor Thompson. *Big Bill Thompson, Chicago, and the Politics of Image* is the most accurate biography of the mayor yet written. The book lacks, however, the excitement and flair of Thompson, the political showman.

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