

Baum's *Wizard of Oz* as Gilded Age Public Relations

By Tim Ziaukas

"You shall not press down upon
the brow of labor this crown of thorns,
you shall not crucify mankind
upon a cross of gold."

— from William Jennings Bryan's
Cross of Gold Speech, 1896

"The Wicked Witch...looked down
at Dorothy's feet, and seeing the Silver Shoes,
began to tremble with fear, for she knew
what a powerful charm belonged to them."


— *The Wizard of Oz*, 1900

L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, published nearly a century ago, has become the most popular American children's story, immortalized through a number of editions, stage and film productions, and especially the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland. Images, characters and lines of dialogue from Baum's novel continue as ubiquitous parts of American popular culture.

Yet Baum's text had a timely agenda for its late-19th-century adult audience, one that belies its seemingly timeless appeal to subsequent generations. Written mostly in 1899 (Rockoff, 745) and published in 1900, *The Wizard of Oz* was produced while the United States was making the transition from a pastoral past to an industrial future, from the post-Civil War era to the country's emergence as a world power at the beginning of the 20th century. *Oz* reflects contemporary concerns generated by that transition.

Baum himself said his stories would "bear the stamp of our times and depict the progressive fairies of today" (Gardner and Nye, 1). *Oz* does. Given the enduring popularity of the text in all its incarnations, only a modest — but provocative — body of critical work, however, bears out Baum's

claim. Littlefield, for example, proves in his groundbreaking essay that "the original *Oz* book conceals an unsuspected depth" (50) and then explicates the text as a parable on populism. In another major exegesis on the novel's contemporary allusions, Rockoff calls *Oz* "not only a child's tale but also a sophisticated commentary on the political and economic debates of the Populist Era" (739). Culver



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positions the text in the context of Baum's interest "in the vagaries of consumer desire" (97).

Finally, in perhaps the most extensive investigation of the issues that anchor the monetary allusions in Baum's novel, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America, 1865-1896*, Ritter claims that *The Wizard of Oz* is "filled with metaphors generated in the money debate of the late nineteenth century" (19).

These critics are correct. Baum's parable is a potent piece of Gilded Age propaganda, a masterpiece of early public relations writing, and part of the progressive surge that would result in the formal emergence of public relations in the generation after Oz.

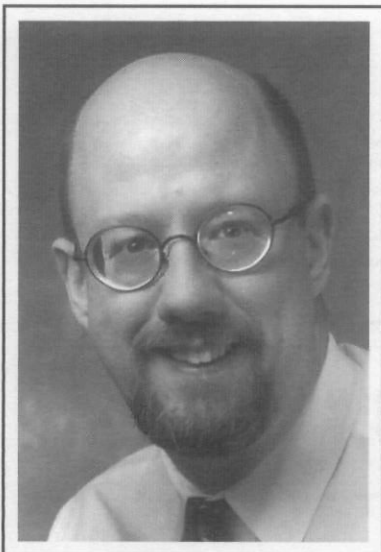
The Battle of the Standards

The decade that produced Oz was galvanized by the debate over what was known as "the financial question." Goodwyn emphasizes that

[t]he importance of [the financial question] could scarcely be exaggerated. How money was created, and on what basis it circulated, defined in critical ways the relationship of farmers, urban workers, and commercial participants in the emerging industrial state (10).

These questions lurk at the heart of Oz. Here is the problem.

After independence from England, the United States had officially adopted bimetallism, that is, a monetary standard in which both gold and silver are used as legal tender. The Coinage Act of 1853, however, "replaced bimetallism in the U. S. with a...de facto gold standard. After 1853 bimetallism remained only as a legal fiction which was finally terminated twenty years later" (Martin, 825). This is the so-called "Crime of '73," a major legislative win for the gold people in their increasingly bitter fight with the silvers (and an incident that would



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come to have special import in *The Wizard of Oz*). The "crime" was the repeal of the silver dollar, "demoneying" silver, further tying the supply of money to the amount of gold (see Friedman and Schwartz, 113-14). This demoneying of silver — tying the amount of available dollars more closely to the amount of available gold, limited the quantity of dollars in circulation, in turn, making them more valuable. As Uchitelle explains, "[w]hen dollars are scarce, their value rises. Reflecting this higher value, interest rates rise for borrowers, and prices drop for goods and services. The money, in effect, is worth more than it buys" (1). This deflation was bad news for the farmers in particular: their money bought less and their crops brought less too.

There's more. During the Civil War, the Union issued "greenbacks," named for the color of the ink used on one side of the bill, whose value was rendered by fiat of the federal government. Miller and VanHoose point out

that national involvement in monetary and banking affairs had been limited in scope since the demise of the Second National Bank of the United States over half a century before; to many of the generation of the 1860s and 1870s, greenbacks were a federal intrusion into private and state affairs (361).

The Resumption Act of 1875, though, ensured the elimination of the greenbacks and put the country further on the road to the gold standard. By 1879, then, the United States was, in effect, on a gold standard, setting the stage for a final debate on "the financial question," an issue that divided the country and was at the heart of American politics, and at the heart of *The Wizard of Oz*.

The issues included in the debate were complicated: Who should issue money, the federal government or the banks? What metal should "back" it, gold, silver, or gold and silver? How much money should circulate and how should that be determined? Opinions divided between the haves and the have-nots, urban and rural, industrialists and farmers and, of course, Republicans and Democrats. Generally, East Coast industrialists and bankers, largely Republican, favored the total resumption of the gold standard. The Democrats, the poor, the workers, and the farmers thought a bimetallic system, both gold and silver, would be to their benefit. Many in this group, especially in the Midwest, were part of the Populist Party, "an agrarian party...formally organized in 1892, with a platform that among other items demanded free and unlimited coinage of silver" (Friedman, 116). These populists were as uncertain about the jittery economy as the East Coast industrialists, who saw foreign investors, most of whom (like England) were on a gold standard, beginning to melt away like troubles over the rainbow. Uchitelle adds that

[c]ompetition and over-expansion made these [post-Civil War] industrialists vulnerable to bankruptcy. That, in turn, made the lenders nervous. And then [the] conflict over the value of the nation's currency finally pushed the lenders to call in their loans, which brought on the Panic of 1893 (1).

The panic revealed an economy in trouble and a "general uneasiness about the currency" (Friedman, 108). Unemployment rose to 18.4 percent in 1894 (Rockoff, 743). Because gold was scarce, the government couldn't issue enough gold-backed money to make credit available to the farmers who were in big trouble. Prices plummeted. Farmers wanted more money in circulation so they could get cheaper credit, and that road, they believed, was paved with the more plentiful silver. The Eastern industrialists and the federal government, with more of an eye on the largely gold-bound foreign investors, thought not. They saw a yellow brick road.

The debate came to a head in one of the most famous political conventions in American history: the Democratic gathering in 1896 that nominated William Jennings Bryan on the power of his Cross of Gold speech. Bryan intoned:

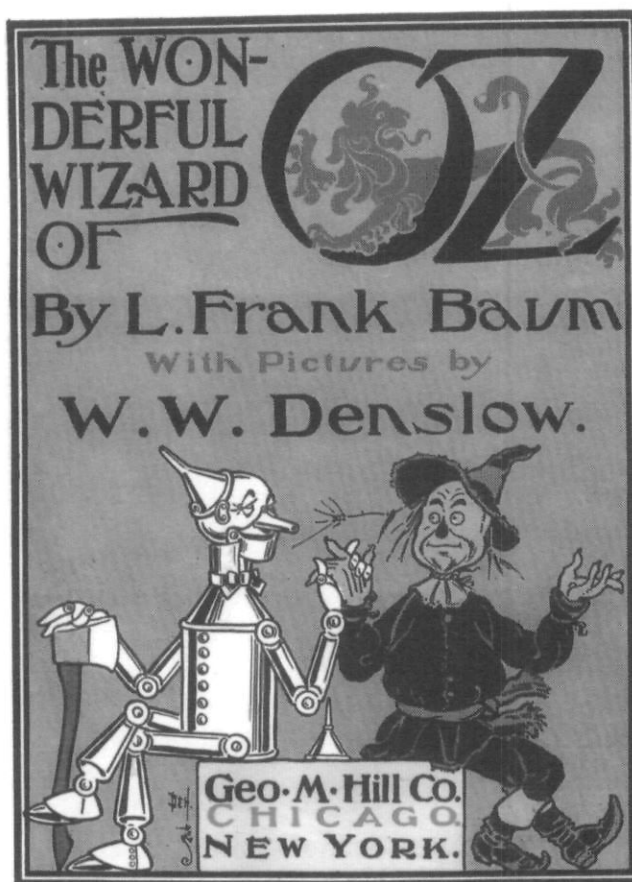
[h]aving behind us the producing masses of this nation...we will answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold (Koenig, 197).

Bryan snagged the nomination of his party and ran on a platform of unlimited coinage of silver.

"The Royal Historian of Oz"

Against this background, the future "royal historian of Oz," as Baum liked to call himself, was "certainly aware of the great events going on around him" (Ritter, 21). He had taken a curious route to Chicago and the context of what would turn out to be his masterpiece.

Lyman Frank Baum was born into a well-to-do family near Syracuse, New York, on May 15, 1856 (see Gardner and Nye, and Baum and MacFall for biography). His father earned his fortune from the Pennsylvania oil fields. Young Frank dabbled in printing and theater. He married, fathered two sons, and in 1887, moved to an area that would become the state of South Dakota, where he ran a variety store and worked in journalism and witnessed the desperation of the kinds of people who would be instrumental in the populist movement. Two more sons were born. In 1891 Baum moved his family to Chicago, where he worked as a reporter for the *Chicago Post*. There he marched in "torchlight parades for William Jennings Bryan... [Baum] consistently voted as a democrat (sic...)[H]is sympathies seem always to have been on the side of the laboring



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classes" (Gardner and Nye, 29). In 1897, he founded the monthly trade publication for window dressers, *The Show Window*, the public relations organ for the National Association of Window Trimmers of America, a group that Baum founded and headed.

Baum's first book, a collection of his version of Mother Goose tales, was published in 1897; the second he printed privately in 1898. Between 1897 and 1900 he was working on two books, *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods*, a manual on early image-making for the retail business and, of course, *The Wizard of Oz*. (Culver's essay brilliantly suggests the connections between Baum's retailing and his fiction.) However focused Baum may have been on the details of his professional life, the zeitgeist of currency-crazed America was absorbed into the parable of a storm coming out of the Middle West, that is, into the highly allusive text that is *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Oh God, give us cyclones..."
— a delegate to the National Silver Party convention, 1896

Recalling *The Wizard of Oz* in the context of its times and as a piece of promotional writing is a historically valuable and often surprising endeavor. As the work of Oz critics Littlefield, Rockoff, Culver and Ritter make clear, now-familiar figures and

characters take on strange but once urgent meanings and dimensions.

The plot of *The Wizard of Oz* is disarmingly simple. An orphan girl, Dorothy Gale, about six years old, lives on a bleak and depressed Kansas farm with her aunt and uncle. One day a cyclone begins to rage, and she and her dog take shelter in the house, which is pulled from its foundation by the cyclone and blown to the Land of Oz. The house lands on and kills the Wicked Witch of the East, who had been wearing a magic pair of silver shoes (made ruby slippers in the Technicolor film, one of

The story of an American girl in silver shoes on a road paved with golden bricks in a country named for the abbreviation for ounce would have rung loudly for an audience in the 1890s.

the many significant differences between Baum's and Hollywood's vision of Oz). Dorothy takes the silver shoes herself (in another change made by the film, which has the good witch assign the slippers to Dorothy). The good witch tells Dorothy that the Wizard of Oz might help her get home. "The road to the [Wizard's] City of Emeralds is paved with yellow brick... so you cannot miss it," the witch explains (Baum, 27). Baum's contemporary audience couldn't miss it, either.

The story of an archetypal American girl in silver shoes on a road paved with golden bricks in a country named for the abbreviation for ounce would have rung loudly for an audience in the 1890s caught up in "the financial question." (Later Baum claimed that he called his fantasy land Oz after glancing at a file drawer whose contents went from O-Z [Baum and MacFall, 110], yet this dadaesque spin, in light of the weight of other monetary evidence, seems apocryphal.) Rockoff identifies the cyclone as "the free silver movement itself. It came roaring out of the West in 1896, shaking the political establishment to its foundation" (745). The Wicked Witch of the East Ritter identifies as Eastern capitalism (288).

Along the yellow brick road, Dorothy encounters three creatures: the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion — each, like Dorothy, in search of a part of himself that, of course, he or she has all along — a brain, a heart, the nerve and the

ability to return home, respectively. Each of these American elements, the farmer, the worker, the loquacious politician, and the archetypal Americanness that is Dorothy, seems to have a sense that something is missing, that she or he lacks the ability to fulfill his or her destinies: the farmer feels stupid and the worker empty; the roar of the politician rings hollow; the displacement of Dorothy is symptom for a rootlessness brought about by the government and the powers of capitalism represented by the witches and, of course, the Wizard of Oz himself.

Baum's intentions seem to be both pro-silver but with some criticism for the populists as well. Each of these now-familiar characters plays a role in the metals controversy: the Scarecrow as a symbol for the farmers, the Tin Woodman for the industrial workers, and the Lion, the great roarer, as an aural pun which conjures silver's greatest orator, William Jennings Bryan.

Bryan cowardly? By the time Baum was writing *Oz*, Bryan had lost his first attempt at the presidency in 1896 but by then the political edge of the silver issue had been blunted by the gradually returning prosperity. Bryan, Rockoff points out, was perceived as

soft-pedal[ing] silver and [concentrating] on new issues... [the Populists] considered this line of action pure cowardice. They wanted the Great Commoner to fight for silver in 1900 as he had in 1896 (748).

Ritter says that many of the images relating to the Lion in *Oz* "paralleled Bryan's history as someone who rose on the strength of his oratory, and was burned in his attempt to confront the powers of Washington" (59).

After a series of adventures, many of which can be fit into the allegory, they arrive at the Emerald City, the political epicenter of the land obsessed with silver, gold and Oz, Washington, D. C. There everyone looks at the world through green-colored glasses. Culver states that

[g]reen is also the color of money, and, for Baum, the spectacles provide a tool for criticizing the Populist assumption that paper money (greenbacks) alone would restore the critical distinction between real value and the means by which the value is expressed and exchanged (114).

The Wizard of Oz agrees to see the motley gang only after he hears about Dorothy's silver shoes: "Oh, he will see you," the soldier tells Dorothy, "at first he was angry, and said I should send you back where you came from. Then he asked me what you looked like, and when I mentioned your silver shoes he was very much interested" (Baum, 126). The silver shoes are central not only to the narrative thrust of the tale but also to the underlying concerns of Baum's largely pro-silver message. The

key to all that happens in *The Wizard of Oz* is encoded into what one knows about silver.

Before Dorothy and her friends get to see the Wizard of Oz, though, they are taken to rooms to freshen up. Dorothy follows a green girl (Dorothy has by now donned the spectacles of Oz) "through seven passages and up three flights of stairs" to her room. This has been seen as a veiled reference to the "Crime of '73" (Ritter, 290; Rockoff, 750), an outrage that would be very much still on the minds of Baum's silver-supporting contemporaries. Literally, the way into the heart of power at the end of the Yellow Brick Road lies through the passages of seven and three: for many, the "Crime of '73" led to the eventual triumph of the gold standard.

The Wizard will grant Dorothy and her friends their wishes if they are able to kill the Wicked Witch of the West. During an encounter with the evil witch, Dorothy throws water on her and she melts. Surprised that Dorothy was able to kill the witch, the Wizard can't make good on his promises, is proven to be a fake and offers symbolic rewards for the gang of four. The Wizard himself, Littlefield says, is "a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a facade of papier mache and noise, might be any President from Grant to McKinley" (54). While attempting to take Dorothy home in his hot-air balloon, the bumbling but well-meaning Wizard takes off leaving Dorothy stranded. But the charm of the silver shoes kicks in again and saves the day.

Dorothy "did not know of the wonderful power the Silver Shoes gave her." — *The Wizard of Oz*

By the time Dorothy got home — and by the time Baum published *The Wizard of Oz* — the power of the silver shoes, just like the political issue that was "the financial question" had dissipated. After Dorothy is told of the power of the shoes by Glinda, the Good Witch of the South — "All you have to do is knock the heels together three times and command the shoes to carry you wherever you wish to go" (Baum, 257) — she loses them on the way back to her bleak Kansas farm: "For the Silver Shoes had fallen off in her flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert" (Baum, 259). Between the time Baum conceived of and executed *The Wizard of Oz*, the economic conditions that made the silver issue so urgent grew better and the Spanish-American War diverted public attention to more dramatic issues (Littlefield, 49). The Gold Standard Act was passed in March 1900. Friedman and Schwartz conclude that

[t]he gold standard had finally triumphed in the United States, and Bryan's second defeat in the Presidential election in the fall of 1900 sealed the doom of silver as a major issue dominating national poli-

tics. The price reversal, which farmers had sought to achieve with silver, was produced after 1897 by the prodigious increase in the international supply of monetary gold. The 'money' issue retreated from the center of political controversy (119).

Baum's parable of America at the turn of the century went on to become the country's most beloved fairy tale, while his complicated propagandistic intentions faded away when those issues retreated from public discourse. Just like Dorothy's silver shoes — lost in transit from Oz — this early public relations aspect of *The Wizard of Oz*, which was a deft combination of children's literature and adult political propaganda, was lost in America's trajectory out of Gilded Age and into the 20th century.

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