
Swiss Solutions of American Problems

McCrackan William Denison

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Author: McCrackan William Denison

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WHAT IS THE REFERENDUM?

Swiss Solutions

of

American Problems

BY

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"The Rise of the Swiss Republic."

"Romance and Teutonic Switzerland."



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THIS STUDY IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

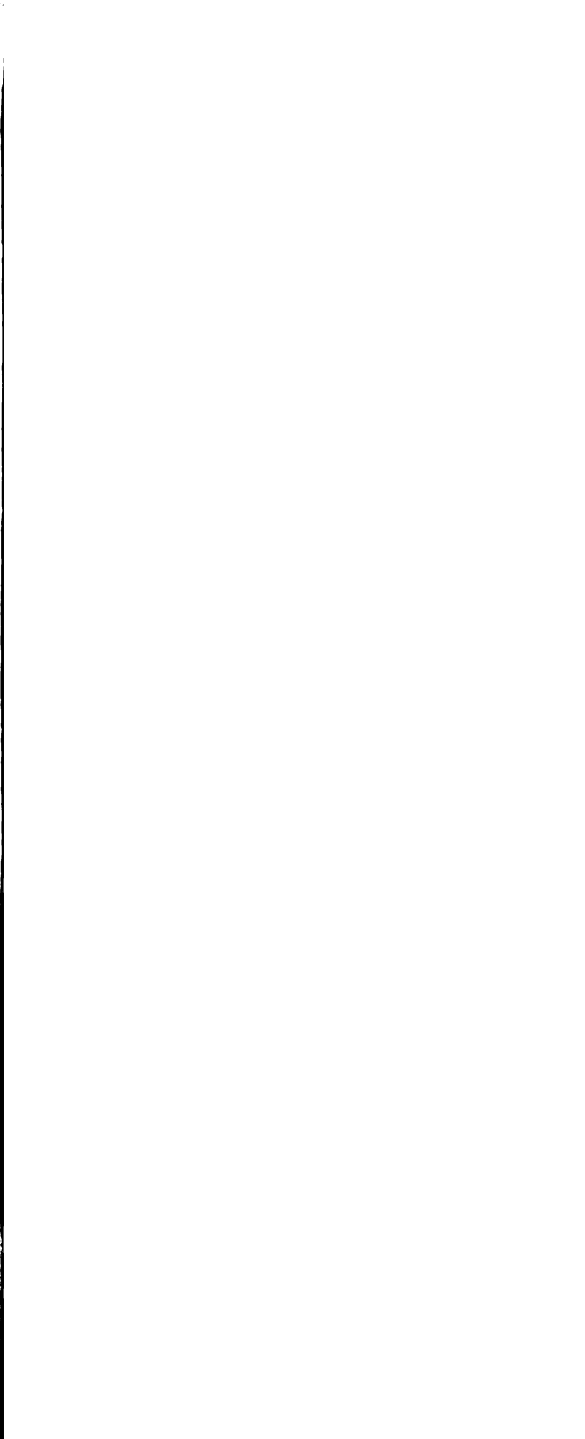
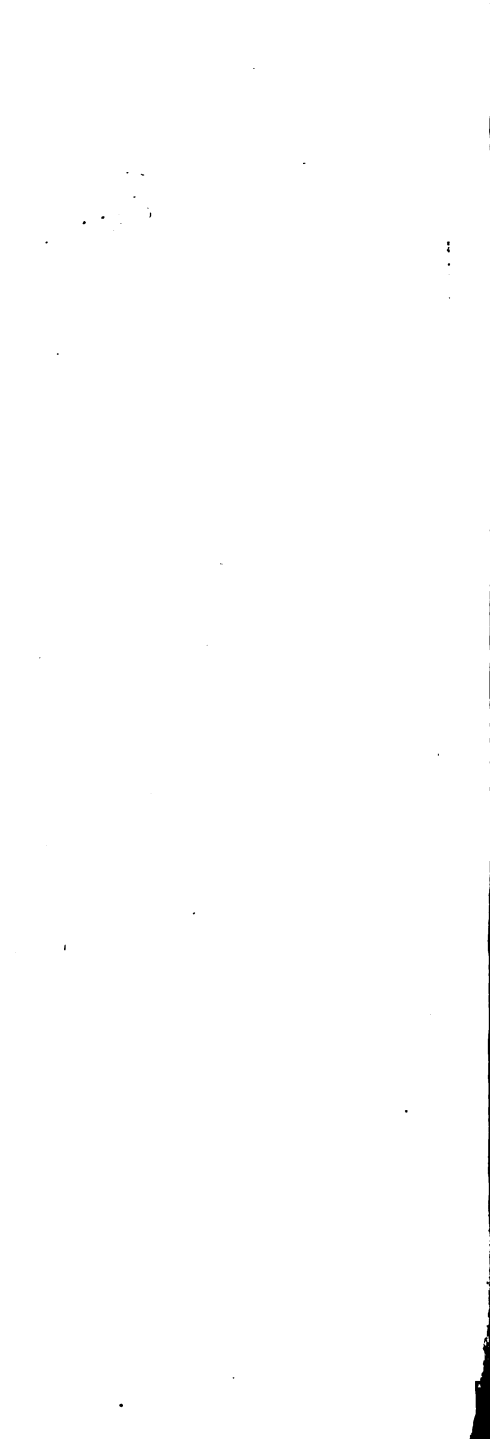
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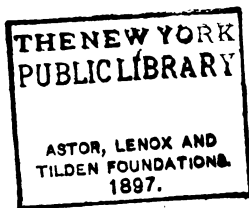
Dedicated

TO

EDWARD LAWSON PURDY,

MY FIRST TEACHER IN RADICAL PRINCIPLES.





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A FIRST WORD.

IF we would solve the social problem in peace, let us look to our methods of legislation while there is yet time! The list of needed reforms is so long, and the means of introducing them are so poor and inefficient, that men are losing patience. The people are weary of that profitless playing with vital problems in which our legislators indulge; they are disgusted with the periodic, unmeaning, meandering up and down the gamut of great questions, palmed off upon them as lawmaking. They cry aloud for some prompt, businesslike action on the part of their representatives.

Practical politicians profess to despise the scholar who treats legislation seriously,—as a science. They call him a theorist, a college professor, and other bad names. And yet, when all is said and done, even our happy-go-lucky methods of making laws must rest upon some scientific basis. As it was reserved for modern students to discover that political economy had definite laws of its own, so it is the duty of the present generation to determine the rules which must govern the science of legislation.

At present, political equality is a mere figure of speech.

Theoretically the sum total of the people exercise the sovereign power; actually a fraction rule the rest.

In the first place, our much-vaunted representative system belies its very name,—it does not represent. No provision has been made for minorities in our legislatures. At every

election—federal, State, and local—unsuccessful voters are virtually disfranchised.

But even if this primary fault be corrected, representatives still have a free hand to pass obnoxious laws. Once elected they cannot be called to account, until their terms are over, and the harm is done. The distance between the voter and the final act of legislation is so great, that his expressed will is frittered away before it accomplishes its object. There are too many stages in the process, too many middlemen, too many cooks to spoil the broth. In that uncertain, vague, middle ground between the people and their laws, a permanent source of corruption has arisen—the lobby. It is a Third House, working secretly, unremittingly, and without scruple for evil ends.

As Switzerland is the only country in the world which supplies a living example of direct democracy, the writer has sought inspiration in studying the institutions of the little sister republic.

When our political machinery has once been reduced to simple, straightforward forms, then we can hope to attack the fundamental, elusive injustices which constitute what is known as the Social Problem. With clearer business methods in politics there will be some chance of effecting radical reforms in society. It will be possible, for example, to grapple definitely with that supreme, all-embracing land question, which bears in its train a host of derived problems.

ALL FOR EACH AND EACH FOR ALL!

CHAPTER I.

HOW THE PEOPLE CAN MAKE THEIR OWN LAWS.

THE TOWN MEETING.

LET us at the start divest our minds of any preconceived notions about politics. Let us forget those wheels within wheels which are suggested by the mention of political machinery. A return to first principles will show us how simple a thing, after all, is the science of legislation.

Given any imaginary body of freemen, how will they naturally go to work to govern themselves? Briefly stated, they will meet at regular intervals to settle matters of common interest, to elect officers commissioned to carry out the laws they may pass, and to draw up a set of rules, or a constitution, as we say. This is self-government reduced to its simplest terms. It is direct legislation. It is pure democracy.

The best examples of this method today are the Swiss Landsgemeinde and the New England Town Meeting.

Suppose we imagine ourselves transported to Switzerland to attend the annual open air assembly of Canton Uri.

It is the first Sunday in May. In a meadow near Altdorf some fifteen hundred voters are ranged around