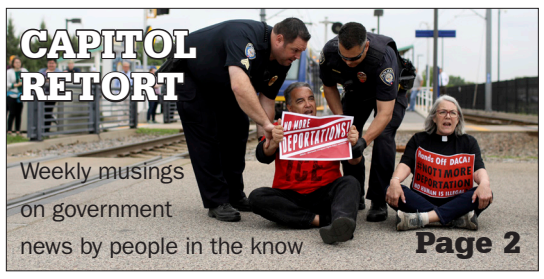

BREAKING THE ICE

Insurance work led Jessica Klander to legal career

Page 3

MINNESOTA LAWYER

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Are mega-bills now a mega-bust?

Trend goes back years, crosses parties—and might be intractable

By Kevin Featherly
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After time ran out on the 2018 legislative session, two of the Capitol's top leaders expressed interest in avoiding a future full of thousand-page mega-bills.


Melissa Hortman

House Minority Leader Melissa Hortman, DFL-Brooklyn Park, was asked late on May 20 if DFLers would act differently should they win back the majority this year. She sounded resolute: No more bills like "Omnibus Prime"—also known as Senate File 3656—would pass if she is house speaker, she said.

She also predicted, accurately, that Gov. Mark Dayton would veto that bill. When he did on May 23, he nixed a lion's share of legislation for the entire session.

"This will go down in history as one of the least productive legislatures ever in terms of numbers of bills passed," Hortman told reporters. "Nobody looking at this legislative session, Democrat or Republican, should ever do anything like that again. We certainly would not."

Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, said he is "open" to adopting a scaled-back approach. "One of the things I am taking as a relatively new majority leader is the idea of splitting [bills] up a little bit more," Gazelka said. "Just straight up."

"I'll believe it when I see it," said Sen. Richard Cohen, DFL-St. Paul, the Senate's senior member.

Cohen is a 10-term DFLer whose legislative career began with his election to the Minnesota House in 1976. He has himself shepherded mega-bills through to signage during supplemental budget years.

His skepticism that change is afoot could be well placed. House Speaker Kurt Daudt, R-Crown, was asked several times on May 23 whether he plans to pare back future spending bills. Each time, he ducked the question.


STAFF PHOTO: KEVIN FEATHERLY

House Speaker Kurt Daudt, R-Crown, reacts grimly to news that Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed two of the key bills passed during the 2018 legislative session—a tax-conformity bill and a nearly 1,000-page spending bill. Daudt told reporters on May 23 that they knew about the vetoes before he did.

"The problem will not exist after the next election," Daudt said, "because this governor will not be in office."

When Dayton vetoed SF 3656, he killed a supplemental finance bill that included a modest $134 million one-year allocation for fiscal year 2019, but a ton of policy—most of it produced by the House. Dayton vetoed it despite a marathon late-session exercise in which conference committee members amended or stripped away 71 of the 117 provisions he identified as objectionable.

It wasn't enough, the governor said after vetoing the bill.

"That bill—both for all the policy and also for the failure to do what we needed from a budget standpoint—was just really, really irresponsible," Dayton said. "It was not meant to be something that I would sign."

Republicans—surprise!—take the opposite view. "He was not going to sign the bills," said Rep. Greg Davids, R-Preston, the House Taxes Committee chair whose own tax-conformity bill also felt Dayton's axe blade. "He wants

Mega-bills | Page 5

Ignatius Donnelly: Paranoid progressive in the Gilded Age


SUBMITTED IMAGE

A populist crusader, Ignatius Donnelly warned that "blind, brutal, and degrading worship of mere wealth, must — given time and pressure enough — eventuate in the overthrow of society and the destruction of civilization."

Editor's Note: This article draws from a variety of books, magazines and articles. A full list of sources is available online.

By Zac Farber
Staff Writer

The mind of Ignatius Donnelly — Minnesota's most notable 19th century politician — was a ceaseless boil of frenzied literary ambition, paranoid visions of doom, get-rich schemes, screwball theories, utopian fantasies and self-contradiction.

Politics of the Past

Despite serving three terms in Congress, Donnelly was best known for writing feverish, pseudoscientific treatises proving how Francis Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare and humanity "rose from a state of barbarism to civilization" on the lost island of Atlantis.

He idolized Chaucer and Milton and had an autodidact's knowledge of history, folklore, paleontology and comparative religion.

But his great theme was apocalypse.

He believed America was on the verge of calamity and envisioned, in his novel "Caesar's Column," a post-revolutionary anarchist leader building a towering monument of corpses and cement in New York's Union Square. "Blind, brutal, and degrading worship of mere wealth," he warned in the book's preface, would lead to civilizational collapse.

Donnelly lived in an era of ascendant industry, rising inequality and rampant corruption and saw himself as a populist crusader waged in a "very unequal contest — one man against a gang of millionaires." He felt the world was split between "the people and their plunderers." Hardworking farmers pitted against rapacious railroad barons, plutocrats and moneylenders.

This dualistic worldview led him, at times, into bouts of hysteria, but despite his extreme cynicism, he strived to find pragmatic solutions. He believed in the ballot box and the power of collective political action and gave a newspaper he founded the motto: "Eternal hostility to every form of oppression of the bodies and souls of men."

Ignatius Donnelly | Page 6

Politics of the Past

Ignatius Donnelly

Continued from page 1

In his lifetime Donnelly was too uncompromising and rigidly moralistic to achieve many political victories, but the reforms he advocated — an eight-hour workday, a graduated income tax, the breaking up of monopolies — would eventually come to define the nation's Progressive movement.

Nicknamed "the Apostle of Discontent," Donnelly helped pave the way to the future by giving voice to the anguish of his age.

"We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin," he said in a February 1892 speech launching a new People's Party. "The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes, unprecedented in the history of the world, while their possessors despise the republic and endanger liberty."

A portly savior

Donnelly was a buoyant, deep-chested man with a ruddy face and chubby fingers. "His fine head is set, Douglas-like, above his broad shoulders, upon the least possible length of neck," the Chicago Tribune observed. A friend once described him as a "young Falstaff" and, like that paunchy knight, he had a darkly comic, slapstick charisma.

An Irish Catholic, Donnelly called Ireland a "prejudiced, bigoted, class-ridden, semi-aquatic country," and he gleefully mocked his Catholic heritage. "I cannot believe," he wrote in his diary, "that the maker of the universe, with its hundred million visible stars and its thousand millions of invisible suns with a billion planets and satellites, worked for twenty years at the carpenter's trade in Judea and permitted a lot of lousy Jews to murder him."

The St. Paul Pioneer once described a Donnelly speech as "a rodomontade, full of empty bluster and boasting, of passionate adjurations, of morbid sentimentality, and of rhetorical pyrotechnics." And even readers of his diary may sometimes wonder if there was more to Donnelly than his ornate, ornery style of comic writing.

Disapproving of a U.S. Supreme Court decision, he wrote that "judicial wigs and gowns are no more to me than so much horse-hair and dry goods." On vacation in Stevens County, he summarized the landscape as "a great expanse of peaceful country, waiting for the crowding numbers and the clamorous competition of the human animal to flow in." In a 450-page work of amateur geology, Donnelly meticulously described the devastation a prehistoric comet had visited on "this human ant-hill, the world."

A well-meaning egotist, Donnelly believed that he alone could deliver the "great dark writhing masses" from their pitiable fate. In his novel "Doctor Huguet," he imagined a white liberal doctor who magically swaps bodies with a poor black man and is forced to experience firsthand the indignities of racism.

The doctor's description of this transformation is an unwitting expression of his author's savior complex: "I have been chosen, by some extra-mundane, superhuman intelligence, out of the multitude of mankind, and subjected to a terrible and unparalleled experience, in order that a great lesson may be taught to the world."

Catastrophe

Donnelly set his speculative novel "Caesar's Column" in 1988, one century in the future.

He envisaged a New York City with 10 million residents living beneath countless "lights, reflected on the sky, like the glare of a great conflagration."

The rich revel in technological miracles. On touchscreen "mirrors," the "news of the day" and the "whole life of the community" unroll before them "like a panorama." Each wrist bears a "vital-watch, which shows every change in the magnetic and electric forces of the body." Above, airships ascend and descend "like monstrous birds."

Meanwhile, in underground factories, "stooped, silent toilers" are condemned to a "sordid struggle for a mere existence." Exemplifying the "iron law of wages," an "endless succession of workers" labor for "the least sum that will maintain life and muscular strength enough to do the work required." After death, their bodies are transported by rail to giant furnaces and "heated to such intense white heat" that they rise "in nameless gasses through the high chimney."

The novel traces the rise of a guerrilla insurgency, the Brotherhood of Destruction, which overthrows the wealthy elite in a bloody rebellion. Traumatized workers murder each other in the streets and the Brotherhood's brutal anarchist leader, Caesar Lomellini, erects a namesake corpse-and-cement cenotaph to honor the "Death and Burial of Modern Civilization." A few survivors then form an agrarian utopia in Uganda.

When it was published in 1890, Donnelly's Gilded Age parable struck a nerve with the public, selling more than 60,000 copies. It was a rousing potboiler in a time of mass industrialization, urbanization and alienation.

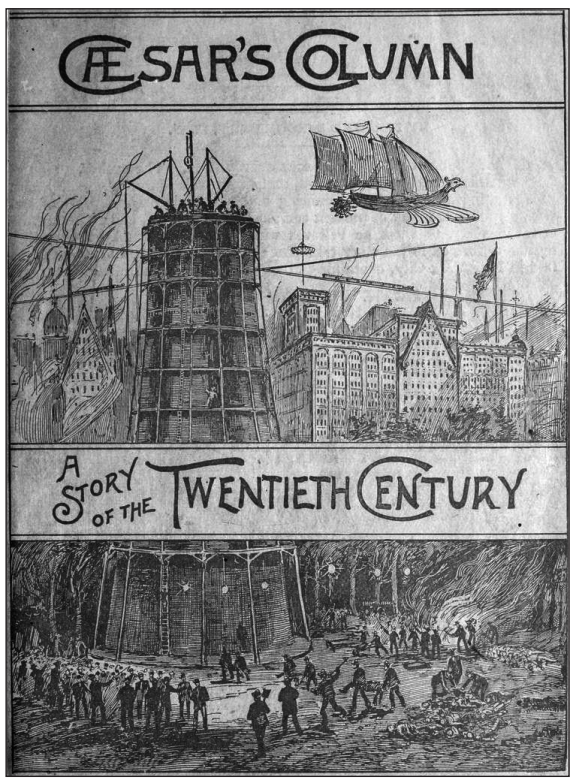
Through the novel's brisk, apocalyptic plot, Donnelly tidily articulated his bleak worldview. "Step by step," he wrote, "mankind will reenact the great human drama, which begins always with a tragedy, runs through a comedy and terminates in a catastrophe." The cause of these recurrent catastrophes he attributed to "human greed — shallow cunning; the basest, stuff-grabbing, nut-gathering, selfish instincts."

A strain of millenarianism also runs through Donnelly's non-fiction. In "Atlantis: The Antediluvian World," plumes of volcanic ash swallow up the great civilizations of antiquity. And in a follow-up work, "Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel," a Norse god punishes "sensual sins" with a cataclysmic event that leaves humanity eating tree bark.

Though Donnelly was a headstrong atheist, he borrowed religious imagery to depict his fallen worlds. "The old tender Christian love is gone," he wrote in "Caesar's Column." "Christ was only possible in a barefooted world; and the few who wore shoes murdered him."

Yet burrowed in his cynic's heart was a kernel of irrational hope; a fierce craving for utopia lay at the center of both his books and his politics.

"Believing, as I do, that I read the future aright, it would be criminal in me to remain silent," Donnelly wrote. "I plead for higher and nobler thoughts in the souls of men [and] for a reign of justice on earth that shall obliterate the cruel hates and passions which now divide the world."



SUBMITTED IMAGE: ARCHIVE.ORG

Title page of an 1891 edition of "Caesar's Column."

Childhood, boyhood, youth

Born in Philadelphia in 1831, Donnelly grew up in a middle-class immigrant family in a city simmering over with racial tensions.

Around his 10th birthday, his father, Philip — a secular-minded, Irish-born doctor — died after contracting typhus from a patient.

When he was 12, nativist mobs ransacked the nearby city of Kensington, called their Irish neighbors "scum unloaded on American wharfs" and desecrated churches as protest against "the bloody hand of the Pope."

In response to these private and public upheavals, Donnelly turned impassive, showing his family few outward signs of grief or fear. Later he would remember his youth with good humor, and it's difficult to say how much his fatalistic outlook owes to the traumas of his

SUBMITTED IMAGE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Perhaps the strangest politician of the 19th century, Ignatius Donnelly founded a city on the banks of the Mississippi, ignited the modern Atlantis craze and believed civilization was on the verge of apocalypse. Donnelly also happened to be one of the greatest progressive voices of the Gilded Age.

youth. "In my boyhood Philadelphia was afflicted with many riots," Donnelly recalled. "Riots between whites and blacks, between natives and foreigners, between the different churches and the different fire companies."

His mother, Catherine — 31 and pregnant at the time of her husband's death — worked long hours as a pawnbroker to provide for Donnelly and his five siblings. The Donnelly children joked that her stern gaze had the power to crack a pair of spectacles, but Catherine was given to moments of exuberance and flights of verbal invention, and she placed great value in education.

She sent Donnelly, her youngest son, to the prestigious, somewhat aristocratic Central High School, which catered to "well-bred, patent-leathershod silver watch boys," according to an 1884 Philadelphia history book.

While Donnelly's experiences at the school likely informed his future class resentments, he was consumed at the time by a giddy intellectual delight. He learned French and German, edited a small newspaper and read "The Canterbury Tales" and "The Faerie Queene."

He developed an abiding love of poetry, and at night he would often wake from a dream and roll out of bed to commit to paper some fleeting vivid phrase. Just before his 18th birthday, Donnelly worked up the nerve to send a letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes, asking the esteemed Fireside Poet to evaluate his magnum opus: an 80-page rhyming poem browbeating the nations of Europe for not being as free and democratic as the United States. ("Mark the Aztecs' fate, / Struggling ignobly, — hopeless, helpless slaves. — / While o'er their cowering souls the storm of ruin raves.")

Holmes, generously, wrote back: "You have a quick eye and a smart wit of your own — dangerous gifts, which like young colts must be bitted and broken before they can become trusted servants." The writer then delicately counseled Donnelly to refrain from printing "this gay production of your boyhood," advising he "subdue the rank luxuriance of your infancy and language."

Donnelly ignored the advice and published the poem.

After high school, Donnelly wrote poetry less as he sought to make his way in the world. He clerked a while for Benjamin H. Bristow, a future U.S. solicitor general, before quitting, at age 21. In the following years, Donnelly drew a meager income from a solo law practice while making his first forays into politics.

He admired the Democratic Party for its pro-immigrant platform, and gave a blustery Fourth of July oration on the subject of American liberty. The speech won him the attention of party luminaries, who suggested he run for state Legislature.

The campaign was a bust, but he learned that his flair for language could be used as a tool and a weapon. He took a savage pleasure in mocking the editor of the New York Tribune for the shape of his head, and he dismissed the Republican Party as the domain of

Politics of the Past

"eery-haired abolitionists, licentious amalgamationists and fanatics of all kind."

But still in his early 20s, Donnelly's political identity was not yet set. Within two years of ridiculing anti-slavery Republicans, he made an about-face and became a registered Republican and a principled abolitionist. "The honest impulses of the human heart," he told a reporter, are "not confined to the lines of any party."

A 'city with a future'

In 1856, seeking fortune and a new start, Donnelly decided to move west.

Pennsylvania, he felt, was a "God-forsaken mountainous state where every man is trying to put down his neighbor." Raised on James Fenimore Cooper's romantic tales of the frontier, Donnelly craved adventure and considered Natty Bumppo the "beau-ideal of a hero." When he first saw the Mississippi River Valley, he wrote in his diary: "What a beautiful land has the red man lost and the white man won."

No sooner had Donnelly arrived in St. Paul than he began plotting how to transform the beautiful land into personal riches. Partnering with a real estate speculator named John Nininger, he hatched a plan to found a town on the bank of the Mississippi River, about 25 miles below St. Paul.

Donnelly showed a genius for promoting Nininger City. Ads touting a "city with a future" appeared in dozens of eastern newspapers, and Donnelly promised in speeches that Minnesota's climate — the "finest lands the sun of heaven ever smiled upon" — could cure tuberculosis.

He founded a propaganda newspaper, the Emigrant Aid Journal, and placed it in the reading rooms of Atlantic Ocean steamships. One article suggested boldly that the population of Nininger could someday exceed that of New York. And, bolder still, the quotation chosen for the paper's masthead presented Nininger as a budding Athens: "'Dost thou know how to play the fiddle?' 'No,' answered Themistocles, 'but I understand the art of raising a little village into a great city.'"

The swagger and bluster paid off. Donnelly and Nininger sold lots in the town for almost 20 times what the land had cost them. Among the Mississippi's professional boatmen, Donnelly gained a reputation as a "land shark."

Within just a couple years of its founding, Nininger became home to three hotels, a dance hall, a grist mill, a baseball club, a dentist's office, a plow factory and six saloons to quench the thirst of the boom town's 1,000 pioneering residents. Donnelly, known as "the Sage of Nininger," took up residence in a big, two-story house topped by an observatory, and luxuriously planned his future. "Here I am, but twenty-six years old, and I have already acquired a large fortune," he wrote. "What shall I do to occupy myself the rest of my life?"

The Panic of 1857 helped settle this question for him.

Nininger's bankrupt citizens left town in droves. Donnelly's paper fortune evaporated and he was forced to turn lots into farmland to pay back his debts. Though land speculation had played a role in triggering the financial panic, the ever-plucky Donnelly tried to sell Nininger as a "cure for the panic" by printing pamphlets urging people to "emigrate to Minnesota where no banks exist." But a salesman's tricks couldn't save Nininger, and over the next decade, it would crumble into a ghost town.

Though he never felt the sting of true penury, Donnelly's life was persistently haunted by debt, and financial hardship did much to shape his class sympathies. "No man ever sucked the sour lemon, Poverty, that did not puck his mouth for ever after," he wrote. "A poor man is nearest barbarism for he is denied the advantage of civilization."

Clambering the rungs

Nininger had turned Donnelly into a notable personality, and he began giving lectures on a range of disparate subjects: American humorists, Minnesota's Indian mound builders and Canadian Roman Catholics. An orator, Donnelly said, should aim "to teach without pedantry, to please without wearying and to enliven without becoming himself ridiculous."

Paid speeches would provide a steady stream of income throughout his life, but they were more than just a chore. He waxed poetic about times with "such a hall and such an audience" when "one's words fall like showers of electric sparks kindling a blaze wherever they touch!"

SUBMITTED IMAGE: MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A photo of Donnelly's house in Nininger City taken around 1930, three decades after his death. Donnelly built the house in the town he co-founded with real estate speculator John Nininger in the late 1850s. Donnelly kept a large bust of Napoleon in the home's library and installed an observatory on its roof. The town went bust in the panic of 1857, but Donnelly would return to the house for the rest of his life. It was demolished in 1949.

His ability to seduce a crowd propelled him to the head of Dakota County's Republican Party. And, eager to prove himself useful to the party, he began doing legal work for Alexander Ramsey, the shadowy giant of Minnesota politics who would go on to become the state's second governor. (Ramsey was the brother-in-law of John Nininger.)

Donnelly had no patience for a lengthy political apprenticeship. He ran for the Minnesota Legislature in 1857, lost, then ran again and lost again the following year. He lamented that the state's immigrants, who usually voted Democrat, wouldn't get over their "fascination of names." "You are clambering the rungs which the overthrow of the old world's aristocratic notions has left open to you," he wrote in the St. Paul Minnesotian. "Which party will help you up?"

SUBMITTED IMAGE: MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Republican Gov. Alexander Ramsey gave Donnelly his big break in 1859 when he asked the 28-year-old to run for office as his lieutenant governor. After a falling out a decade later, Ramsey defeated his former protege in a race for the U.S. Senate.

Donnelly got his big break in 1859, when Ramsey asked him to run as his lieutenant governor. The Democratic papers denounced Donnelly as "a blatant writer and dysenteric scribbler" and "a rampant Loco Foco in Philadelphia." But his wife, Kate, coached him on how best to comport himself. "Every word in relation to 'foreign,' 'Irish,' 'Catholic,' either for or against you will put your foot in it," she wrote. "Say nothing and be deemed wise."

Ramsey won the governorship and Donnelly became, at just 28 years old, the holder of the second-highest office in the state. "However much our opponents may be disposed to make game of him, he is at least a tolerable match for their heaviest guns," the St. Paul Times wrote.

As lieutenant governor, Donnelly established a reputation as a skilled parliamentarian. He advocated for reduced interest rates and less onerous bankruptcy penalties. He preached literacy for farmers — plowing the "mind's acre," he called it. And he won power in the conventional way, weighing alliances and trading favors.

When the Civil War broke out, Ramsey was on a trip east and Donnelly, as acting governor, was tasked with assembling an army. In the entire state, there were only 200 troops and a single cannon.

When Ramsey resumed his duties, Donnelly sought a high-paying regimental command, but the governor wouldn't allow it; Ramsey feared the military post would turn his deputy into a viable political opponent.

Unwilling to join the army as a private, Donnelly managed to obtain military experience another way. During the Dakota War of 1862, he was dispatched, as a liaison officer, to suppress the Dakota uprising. (The Dakota people had been forced onto reservations, encircled by white settlers and effectively starved; Ramsey would later urge genocide.)

Donnelly saw no fighting but witnessed the evacuation of New Ulm's townspeople, which he described, with a lurid pathos, in the pages of the St. Paul Press: "There were mothers there [who] wept over children slaughtered before their eyes; strong men who in a moment had been stripped of their worldly wealth, of home, of wife, and of family; who had escaped into the grass with the death shrieks of [their] parents, brothers, and sisters ringing in their ears."

That fall, Donnelly ran for Congress. Just as Ramsey had feared, his war exploits had earned him the favor of the state's soldiers, and he supported giving them the right to vote in federal elections.

To appeal to the rest of the electorate, Donnelly waged a bromide-heavy campaign — forcefully egalitarian but light on policy specifics. "The theory of our government is the absolute equality of all its members without regard to all accidents of birth, education, wealth or intelligence," he said in stump speeches.

He won the election the day after his 31st birthday.

'Leprous with slander'

Donnelly detested the endless small talk of Washington.

After one long party, he published an article in the St. Paul Dispatch bemoaning the "weak men who haunt the punch room" and the inescapable hand shaking. "The great clatter, jangle and chatter goes on," he wrote. "A thousand interests, wishes, vanities, mingle together in one stupendous buzz and burr, while the mechanical

Donnelly | Page 8

Politics of the Past

Donnelly

Continued from page 7

host and hostess stand smiling away and working their pump handles."

Yet Donnelly found the work of a congressman highly engaging.

He saw the country's vast "unsettled lands" as a solution to a range of social ills, and his mind teemed with ideas for harnessing the possibilities of a still-wild continent. He pioneered the concept of planting public forests and, to encourage settlement in the West, he obtained land grants for the expanding railroads. Addressing Congress for the first time, he delivered (from memory) a 16-page speech proposing the creation of a federal immigration bureau that would encourage "scattering over new and virgin lands the pent-up and oppressed populations of the elder nations."

As the Civil War continued, Donnelly vocally defended the rights of freed slaves and Northern blacks.

His views on racial justice were tinged with bigotry and nativism. He deployed racist stereotypes about a Jewish aristocracy practicing "gold bondage" and Chinese immigrants "who can live on rice and rats." And even his progressive beliefs were laced with a casual white supremacism. As late as 1860, he spoke of "doing unalterable justice to the black to advance the dignity and promote the welfare of the white race."

But as a congressman, Donnelly successfully pushed through legislation to give an elementary education to freedmen and refugees. And in 1865 he introduced a bill to create a National Bureau of Education that would guarantee access "without regard to race or color." (The Democrat-run St. Paul Pioneer accused him of bankrupting Minnesota taxpayers to pay for "nigger schools.")

Donnelly spent six years in Washington, over which time his egalitarian impulses hardened into an anti-elitist fury, and he slowly broke with the increasingly pro-business Republican Party.

As Donnelly departed from the party line, the knives came out for him; his opponents leveled accusations (mostly baseless) that he was engaged in fraud, treachery and debauchery, and had swindled his own mother out of $4,000. The trumped-up charges fed his suspicion that the political process had been captured by ruthless plutocrats.

When Rep. Elihu Washburne, R-Illinois, called him an "office beggar" and accused him of taking bribes from the Union Pacific Railroad, Donnelly vowed in his diary "eternal war with all assassins of reputation." In fact, Donnelly had accepted a job as the Lake Superior & Mississippi Railroad's chief lobbyist, although the stock he earned as payment sold for little.

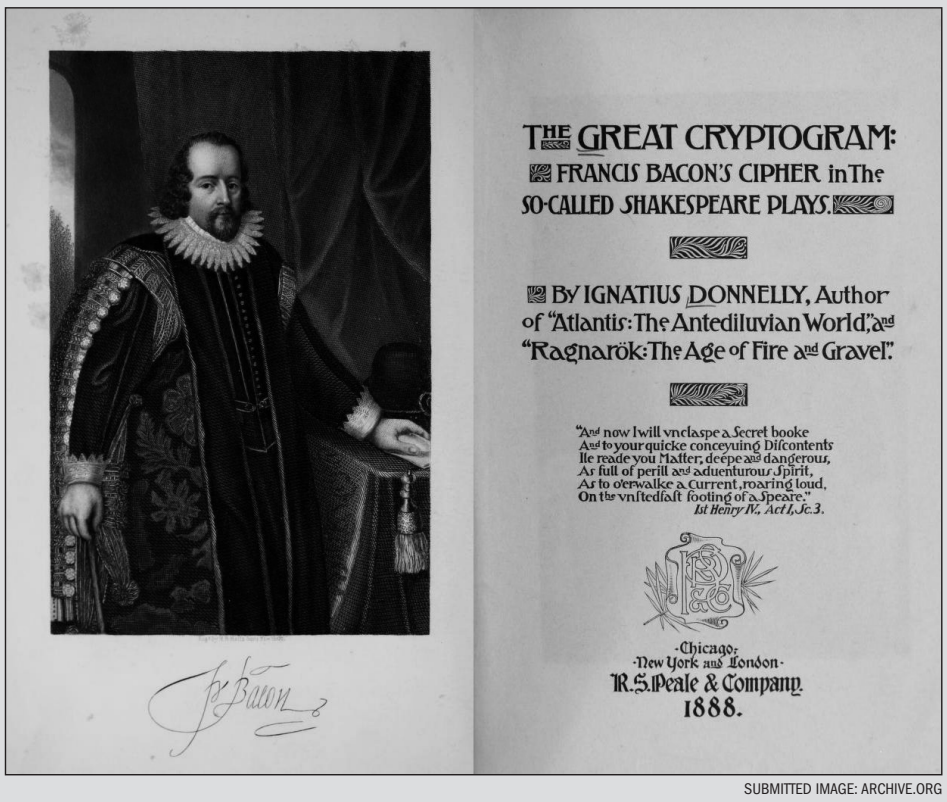
The Minneapolis Tribune wrote a poem:

> Ignatius, the martyr, as he usually is,
> Is in water so hot that it fairly doth "siz"
> But he swears "you can't prove it; I got not a cent
> From the railroads to which I my influence lent."

Overcompensating for his guilt, Donnelly lashed out at Washburne in a miraculously vulgar, hour-long speech on the House floor. Not an inch of Washburne was spared in the tirade — not his "tongue leprous with slander," nor the "gastric juices" of his "foul stomach," nor his "mouth [like] a den of foul beast giving forth deadly odors." After thrice being called to order by the Speaker of the House, Donnelly wound up his speech: "If there be one character which, while blotched and spotted all over, yet raves and rants and blackguards like a prostitute; if there be one bold, bad, empty bellowing demagogue, it is the gentleman from Illinois."

The speech was a colossal miscalculation. The St. Paul Pioneer called Donnelly "the nastiest and most foul-mouthed wretch who ever had a seat in the American Congress." The Republican-dominated House of Representatives was shamed

Donnelly | Page 26



SUBMITTED IMAGE: ARCHIVE.ORG

In the 1870s, Donnelly became convinced that Francis Bacon had written the works of Shakespeare. His 1,000-page book "The Great Cryptogram" outlined his bogus theory that that a hidden cipher (involving irregular pagination, hyphenation and italics) proved Bacon's authorship.

A lost continent and a lost cipher

BY ZAC FARBER
Staff Writer

The myriad tribulations of political life weighed heavily on Donnelly.

"Metaphorically speaking there was nothing left to me but backbone and fists," he wrote after losing an 1880 congressional campaign. "It seemed as if all the devils in hell were let loose against me and what one didn't think of another did."

Donnelly found refuge in a string of writing projects — nine volumes in all — which allowed him a greater measure of control. "My books have lifted me out of the dirty cess-pool of politics, nasty enough at all times, but absolutely foul to the man who does not win," he wrote.

His first book, "Atlantis: The Antediluvian World," was, in part, a work of fandom, influenced by Francis Bacon's 1627 utopian novel "New Atlantis" and by Jules Verne's treatment of the legendary lost continent in "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

But Donnelly approached the imaginary landmass with a diligent scientific earnestness. Discarding all conflicting evidence, he gathered together scraps of myth from across the ancient world and asserted that "the description of this island given by Plato is not, as has long been supposed, fable, but veritable history." Donnelly went on to claim that Atlantis was the cradle of civilization — the true "Garden of Eden" — and the birthplace of all of humanity's religions and mythologies.

The book was a massive best-seller that turned Donnelly overnight into a literary celebrity, and it remains the ur-text for most modern stories of Atlantis. Following its publication, mystical Atlantean cults sprung up across the country and New Orleans made the faddish continent the theme of its 1883 Mardi Gras.

Some of his readers may have had their doubts, but Donnelly himself was a true believer. Before the book was printed, he worried "that some accident would destroy the single copy I had and that the world would lose a revelation."

That Donnelly's tale was not immediately laughed into oblivion can be credited to his talent for shaping a narrative into an orderly, legalistic framework.

The book's even-handed tone was noted even by his detractors. "[I] admire the great mass of materials he collected in support of his theory and [am] amused at the characteristically illogical use he makes of them," the St. Paul Pioneer Press editor Joseph Wheelock wrote in a private letter. "He is gifted with a fine imagination without a particle of reasoning power."

In the 1870s and '80s, Donnelly developed an elaborate theory to prove that Francis Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare. After spending thousands of hours scrutinizing Shakespeare's 1623 First Folio, he claimed to have discovered a hidden cipher involving irregular pagination, hyphenation, italics and bracketing — all pointing to Bacon's authorship.

Published as a 1,000-page book titled "The Great Cryptogram," Donnelly's theory was met at first with uncertain skepticism. "We cannot and will not yet surrender Shakespeare's glorious name and fame to the desperate ingenuity or self-deception of Mr. Donnelly," the London Daily Telegraph wrote.

Donnelly traveled to England and waged a robust defense. Oscar Wilde attended a lecture he gave in Westminster Hall, and Donnelly held his own against scholars in debates at Cambridge and Oxford. Polled afterward, about half the debate listeners were so befuddled they refused to pick a winner. (Donnelly was pleased.)

But as time passed, his theory was realized to be a ludicrous farce. The mathematics of the cipher were proved to be a sham. Donnelly tried to persuade Bacon's heir, the Earl of Verulam, to dig a six-foot-deep hole on his estate in search of lost Baconian manuscripts, but the earl declined.

The London Strand Journal riffed:

> Come from your grave, O "Bard of Avon," come,
> And tell this Yankee all his tall talks a flam,
> A figment of his too "cute brain," a hum,
> The disinterment of his "cryptogram."

Walt Whitman took a more cosmic view in a poem he included in "Leaves of Grass":

> In every object, mountain, tree, and star —
> in every birth and life,
> As part of each — evolv'd from each —
> meaning, behind the ostent,
> A mystic cipher waits unfolded.

This was no consolation for Donnelly, who took the book's rejection personally. His father, who died when he was a young boy, was an avid Bacon reader.

Succumbing to paranoia, he vented in his diary about critics "inspired by the railroad corporations" in "concerted purpose." "I may never be able to convince the world that I am right," he worried. "[I] will go to the grave ridiculed and despised."

Yet his conviction in the accuracy of the cipher was unshaken. Donnelly wanted badly to believe that Bacon, a debtor, and not Shakespeare, a moneylender, had authored the plays. "There is no more doubt of the reality of the cipher than there is of the reality of the plays," he wrote.

In his last book, "The Cipher in the Plays and on the Tombstone," Donnelly's Bacon mania reached peak pathos: He claimed that Bacon had written not only the works of Shakespeare, but also those of Christopher Marlowe and (in Spanish) those of Miguel de Cervantes.

Employment

Donnelly

Continued from page 8

into withdrawing an article of impeachment against President Andrew Johnson that accused him of improper language. A friend of Donnelly's wrote him privately that "you have fallen in the esteem of the cultivated, refined & religious people who largely make up the Republican Party."

And, indeed, the Minnesota Republican Party turned against Donnelly in 1868 as he ran for a fourth term in Congress. He was falsely accused of favoring mob rule and violence. And lumberjacks armed with pikes broke up his rallies, spurred on by the wealthy sawmill owner William Washburn — Elihu's brother.

After losing his congressional seat, Donnelly tried to reverse his ill fortune by challenging Ramsey in a race for the U.S. Senate. But Ramsey held all the cards, and easily bested his former protégé.

Donnelly would never again win a statewide race.

His friend Harlan Hall later said that were it not for his speech excoriating Washburne, Donnelly's "political future, and indeed all his life would have been different."

A prophet of the Gilded Age

There are many ways the 19th century's final decades resemble our own time.

Millions of immigrants — many non-English speaking and fleeing extreme poverty — arrived in the nation's major cities. In response, nativist reactionaries adopted a politics of white supremacy.

Corruption proliferated, bribes were common and corporate leaders contributed lavishly and openly to the campaigns of both Democrats and Republicans.

Rapid economic growth was punctuated by dramatic financial crises that triggered bank failures, unemployment and widespread unease.

The railroads reshaped the world, making travel and commerce easier, even as they upended established institutions and concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a small coastal elite.

By 1897 the richest 1 percent of Americans held half the nation's treasure. "We are the rich," the writer Frederick Townsend Martin famously said. "We own America; we got it, God knows how, but we intend to keep it if we can."

In the second half of Donnelly's career, he strived to respond to this new era and articulate the human toll of a tectonic social and technological transformation.

He thought the new industrial economy was an engine of frightening dehumanization. It turned people into sheep with "the same soulless likeness," in thrall to the pleasures of gadgets and trifles — "merely automata, in the hands of some ruthless and unrelenting destiny."

If America couldn't forge a "bond of brotherhood between the classes," Donnelly believed, then the country would disintegrate. "The rich, as a rule, despise the poor; and the poor are coming to hate the rich," he wrote. "They wait only for the drum-beat and the trumpet to summon them to armed conflict."

A party for the 'plain people'

Disillusioned with both major parties and searching for a cleaner form of politics, Donnelly took leadership roles in a succession of far-left agrarian populist movements.

Between 1874 and his death in 1901, he was elected to the Minnesota Legislature nine times as an independent and as a candidate for third parties such as the Farmers' Alliance and the Anti-Monopolists. The New York Sun wrote in 1890 that a Minnesota reform convention without Donnelly would be "like a catfish without waffles in Philadelphia."

He wielded more influence than power. Though many thought him a sage, he was routinely voted out of office and the state's ruling parties largely ignored him. The Hastings Gazette called his career "a series of blunders any one of which would have proved fatal to a man of less genius." Donnelly joked that he was "the most popular man in Minnesota — between elections."

Nonetheless, he fought vigorously to implement his progressive agenda.

He spoke out against inmate whipping and child labor. He supported interest rate caps, trust busting, civil service reform and inheritance taxes. As a lawmaker, he exposed an insurance scam and a coal distributor's price-fixing scheme, and he revealed how lumber companies had pirated pine and cedar trees from state-owned lands.

Donnelly's political career reached its zenith in 1892, when he was tapped to write the founding document of the newly formed People's Party.

The party was a national coalition of populist third parties brought together by mutual antipathy toward railroad monopolies, "Eastern Elites" and powerful banking interests. When Donnelly and other party leaders convened in St. Louis' Exposition Music Hall, the Associated Press called it "the greatest gathering of the representatives of disaffected political elements that the world has ever seen."

In drafting the preamble of the party platform, Donnelly compressed a lifetime of resentments into a succinct call to arms modeled loosely on the Declaration of Independence. "We seek to restore the government of the republic to the hands of the 'plain people' with whom it originated," he wrote.

Marshaling all his rhetorical powers to expose the "prolific womb of governmental injustice," Donnelly outlined how American liberty was being threatened in the Gilded Age:

> Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized. Many of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places in order to prevent universal intimidation or bribery. The newspapers are subsidized or muzzled; public opinion silenced; business prostrate, our homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right of organization for self-protection; imported pauperized labor beats down their wages; a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down. … A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents and is taking possession of the world.

To overthrow this conspiracy and avoid "the establishment of an absolute despotism," Donnelly and the People's Party put forward a set of radical policy solutions aimed at redistributing wealth and protecting workers' rights.

They proposed instituting a graduated income tax and establishing an eight-hour workday.

They wanted to relieve the burden of debt by coining silver and gold and printing paper money to inflate the dollar.

They wished to seize unused frontier land owned by the railroads and reserve it for homesteaders.

And they called for the nationalization of the era's primary mass communication networks: the telegraph and the telephone. "Being a necessity for the transmission of news, [they] should be owned and operated by the government in the interest of the people," the party platform declared.

The People's Party's 1892 presidential candidate, James B. Weaver, won more than a million votes (about 8.5 percent of those cast) and its reformist economic agenda would be integrated into the policy proposals of William Jennings Bryan and other turn-of-the-century progressives.

But the People's Party itself shriveled quickly into irrelevance. When Donnelly was selected as its vice presidential nominee in 1900, the party managed to get only a third of a percent of the popular vote.

A 'divine lunatic'

Donnelly died of a heart attack shortly after midnight on the first day of the 20th century.

Both madman and seer, he embodied a recurring American archetype: The idealistic reformer with a golden tongue — half-brilliance, half-blather — who dazzles the public with visions of doom and communal bliss. A deeply paradoxical figure, his heart was full of delusion and aspiration, despair and optimism, a blinkered vanity and a selfless benevolence.

"I hope," Donnelly once wrote, "to be ranked by posterity with those divine lunatics Socrates & Bacon who loved mankind more than they loved themselves."