

“Our Third Martyr President”:

Marketing the Assassination of William McKinley

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A lone individual travels house-to-house, door-to-door, spreading the news. President McKinley, after being shot in Buffalo, has died, becoming the third president in forty years killed by an assassin's bullet. The news is a cause for nationwide grief. Now, in this nondescript town, this solemn, serious person takes it upon themselves to visit community leaders and tell them what has occurred. When doors open, however, the residents inside are not startled by the news. They have heard it in the newspapers, from friends, and perhaps even from individuals like our subject. This individual is not a town crier, spreading the breaking news of distant events, but a traveling book canvasser, seeking to turn the outpouring of national grief into profit.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, book canvassers were a common nuisance, and William McKinley was a popular subject to sell.¹ Rather than traveling through towns with complete books, publishers created canvassing books – sometimes called salesman's samples, dummies, subscription books, prospectuses, or blads – that contained only selected pages, a variety of illustrations, price information, binding samples, and other sales material. As Keith Arbour demonstrated in his landmark catalog of the Michael Zinman collection in the 1990s, canvassing books were produced for a wide range of subjects, including Mark Twain, presidential biographies, children's books, sensational disaster stories, and everything in between. Despite their onetime prevalence, these canvassing books remain an understudied aspect of Gilded Age and Progressive Era America. Aside from Arbour's catalog, the only major works about these books in the past fifty years have been focused on the inclusion of a book canvasser in Mark Twain's unpublished version of *Hamlet*, two articles on the experiences of female book canvassers, an article on subscription book sales in the Dakota Territory, and an article about the journey of a specific

1. Jolie Braun, "'There is no respectable woman... that sells books!': The Memoirs of Nineteenth-Century Woman Book Canvassers," *Textual Cultures* 14, no. 1 (2021): 124; Keith Arbour, *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers' Ephemera, 1833-1951, in the Collection of Michael Zinman*, (Ardsley, New York: The Haydn Foundation for the Cultural Arts, 1996), xi.

medical canvassing book in 1869.² The focus has been on how these books were used, rather than the content they contain.

President William McKinley was shot and killed by anarchist Leon Czolgosz in Buffalo, New York, on September 6, 1901, and died on September 14.³ That dramatic event combined several popular genres for canvassing books: American history, the presidency, and calamities. The books about McKinley released in the wake of this tragedy offer a way to analyze what publishers saw as marketable about William McKinley and how they transformed the outpouring of grief over his death at the hands of an anarchist into a commodity to be bought and sold.

Republican newspaper editor Murat Halstead wrote several books sold by subscription, including one about McKinley and his death published in 1901.⁴ Titled *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley*, it serves as a good starting point for understanding these books in many respects. Because the volume does not contain the complete text, it is a very thin book. The cloth binding cost \$1.50, while for an extra seventy-five cents, purchasers could have it bound in an imitation leather called Texoderm. The canvassing book is well-illustrated, with photos of McKinley, his wife, Theodore Roosevelt, the McKinley home, his cabinet, and more. On a sheet with sales information on the back, reference is made to the fact that Halstead was a friend of the president for “thirty years.” It is also claimed that “Every parent, every teacher, every statesmen [sic], every business man, every working

2. Keith Arbour, “Book Canvassers, Mark Twain, and Hamlet’s Ghost,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 93, no. 1 (1999): 5-37; Braun, ““There is no woman...””; Amy M. Thomas, ““There is Nothing So Effective as a Personal Canvass’: Revaluing Nineteenth-Century American Subscription Books,” *Book History* 1 (1998): 140-155; Lisa Lindell, “Bringing Books to a ‘Book-Hungry Land’: Print Culture on the Dakota Prairie,” *Book History* 7 (2004): 215-238; Michael Hackenberg, “Hawking Subscription Books in 1870: A Salesman’s Prospectus from Western Pennsylvania,” *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America* 78, no. 2 (1985): 137-153.

3. For a recent scholarly interpretation of the assassination, see Eric Rauchway, *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt’s America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

4. Murat Halstead, *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley: Our Martyred President* [canvassing book] (n.p.: Murat Halstead, 1901).

man, every youth, every minister, wants it. He exemplified the teachings of Christ in his daily life.”⁵

There is a notable absence of information about his achievements as president or his policies.

Looking at this page alone, you could never find out what McKinley actually believed as a politician.

Death and assassination also stalk Halstead’s book. There are photos of assassin Leon Czolgosz, illustrations of where McKinley was shot, and a portrait of Emma Goldman, the so-called “High priestess of Anarchy” who inspired Czolgosz.⁶ While many of these canvassing books contain only select pages from select chapters, this book has the complete introduction, but McKinley does not take center stage. In fact, he is not even mentioned for a page and a half.⁷ Instead, much attention is given to Lincoln and Garfield’s assassinations, and photos representing these presidents and their deaths are found throughout the book. Halstead also describes how anarchists are the “litany of the Devil” intent on destroying society, and Halstead argues that Czolgosz, the “baffled assassin,” must have had “accomplices.”⁸ Czolgosz is not mentioned by name in the introduction, but is described as a “product of the worst case of Foreignism,” with Halstead adding that “It is worth thinking about as a dispensation that no American can pronounce his infamous name.”⁹ With this anti-immigrant language, anarchism is made to seem foreign, while McKinley is virtuous, heroic, and American in contrast. The choice of chapters is also interesting. The pages the publisher selected are about McKinley’s personal life, the election season, his death, and anarchy. There is very little information about his policies as president, the Spanish-American War, the McKinley Tariff of 1890, or his Civil

5. Halstead, *Illustrious Life*, [425].

6. See also John Chalberg, *Emma Goldman: American Individualist* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

7. Halstead, *Illustrious Life*, 17-18.

8. Halstead, *Illustrious Life*, 22-23.

9. Halstead, *Illustrious Life*, 22.

War service.¹⁰ Death is never far away: the chapter on the Republican National Convention is titled “The Second Nomination of the Third Martyr President for the Presidency.”¹¹

Two of these canvassing books share an interesting relationship: *The Memorial Life of William McKinley* by Colonel G. W. Townsend and *The Life of William McKinley: Soldier, Statesman, and President* by John W. Tyler.¹² While they have different bindings, title pages, authors, publishers, and sales information, the text inside the book, in many cases, appears to be the same. There is nothing in either book alluding to the other title, though they both advertise introductions by James Rankin Young. Because the page numbers in Townsend’s version are sometimes scratched out, it seems likely that it is based on Tyler’s version. Both were sold for the same prices, either \$1.50 or \$2.00, based on the binding. While the text of the book may be the same, the content of the canvassing books are very different. On the sales page, Tyler’s book places McKinley alongside Lincoln and Garfield as martyrs, much like Halstead’s account.¹³ While the corresponding page for Townsend’s book mentions these presidents, it does not do so in the context of assassination.¹⁴ The page for Tyler emphasizes how “every American” should be interested in the book, and like Halstead, downplays his political role. In fact, the only reference to partisanship is that McKinley could “hold his party in check.”¹⁵ Townsend’s version, meanwhile, has more information about his life as a

10. For more on McKinley’s life and presidency, see Robert Merry, *President McKinley: Architect of the American Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017) and Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980).

11. Halstead, *Illustrious Life*, 205.

12. G. W. Townsend, *Memorial Life of William McKinley* (Philadelphia: Elliott Publishing Co., 1901); John W. Tyler, *The Life of William McKinley: Soldier, Statesman, President* (Philadelphia and Chicago: P. W. Ziegler & Co., 1901).

13. Tyler, *The Life of William McKinley*, [353].

14. Townsend, *Memorial Life of William McKinley*, [162].

15. Tyler, *The Life of William McKinley*, [354]. Scholars have attributed the rise of the president as being the clear leader of a party to both Grover Cleveland and McKinley. See Daniel P. Klinghard, “Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and the Emergence of the President as Party Leader,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 736-760.

politician, mentioning that he served in Congress and as Governor of Ohio before reaching the presidency. Both books advertised that the history of anarchy would be shared and featured identical illustrations of Czolgosz and Goldman. The featured text, however, contained very little about the anarchist movement.

In the early parts of these books, the content is broadly similar. They contain pages from the chapters on McKinley's early life, his Civil War service, the start of his career, his actions as an executive, and his first term. Both contain pages from a chapter about the McKinley Tariff, but Townsend's version contains no discussion of that key part of his legislative career. While they include illustrations of the Spanish-American War, the text about the war focuses on actions leading up to the United States' involvement. They contain little to no information about territorial expansion, though Tyler's version has a prominent section on McKinley's "declaration against imperialism."¹⁶ Where Townsend's book has more information about the assassination itself, Tyler's has more on the funeral services and eulogies for McKinley.

Based on this, it seems possible that these two books represent how McKinley was marketed to different audiences. Townsend's canvassing book deals more with political issues and the substance of McKinley's career, while Tyler's focuses more on tugging at the heartstrings of consumers with an emphasis on the grief around McKinley's death and his virtues as an individual, not as a politician. It seems that the Townsend version was marketed to a more pro-McKinley audience, while Tyler's was aimed towards buyers more skeptical of McKinley's actions while in office.

Alexander McClure and Charles Morris's *The Authentic Life of William McKinley: Our Third Martyr President* is notable for advertising on the title page that a biography of Roosevelt would be

16. Tyler, *The Life of William McKinley*, 88.

included.¹⁷ While the books mentioned previously contained illustrations of McKinley's successor, few gave much attention to the twenty-sixth president in the featured text. Like the others, two binding styles were offered at the same price as the Townsend and Tyler book. The sales information focuses less on why one should buy a McKinley biography, but more on why one should buy this particular biography. The credentials of the authors are cited, including the fact McClure knew McKinley. According to the page, "No expense has been spared to make this the standard biography of our third martyred president."¹⁸ While the word martyr appears throughout this book, McKinley is not placed alongside Lincoln and Garfield.

The table of contents told prospective buyers that the full volume would contain chapters covering the major points of McKinley's life. While the other biographies did not always seem to follow chronological order, McClure and Morris planned to move step by step through the life of the deceased president. Only at the end, after the assassination, would that pattern be broken to discuss anarchy and Roosevelt. The inclusion of a table of contents is notable, as the other books contained sporadic chapters and did not provide a comprehensive overview of everything covered in the finished volume. The actual text spotlighted covers a wide range of McKinley's life, though the chapter titles do not always match what is in the table of contents. It also skips over the bulk of his presidency, jumping straight from a brief description of the Spanish-American War into his assassination.¹⁹ McKinley's presidency is described in a very hopeful manner, with the authors writing about "The President as Harmonizer" and "The Disappearance of Sectionalism."²⁰ Where the Townsend and Tyler books seemed hesitant to condemn territorial expansion, the McClure and Morris volume said the annexation of Hawaii was "the first step in the new and broader life upon

17. Alexander K. McClure and Charles Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley* (Philadelphia: Globe Bible Publishing Co., 1901): iii.

18. McClure and Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley*, [322].

19. McClure and Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley*, 160-307.

20. McClure and Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley*, 159, 158.

which this republic has entered, and from which neither duty nor self-interest will allow it to turn back.”²¹

Unlike the books covered already, the *Complete Life of William McKinley and Story of His Assassination* mentions his demise on the front cover. It was published by the Bible House of Chicago and written by that company’s treasurer, Marshall Everett.²² Like in the Halstead and McClure canvassing books, this volume claims that the author was a friend of McKinley’s. While the base price for this book was \$1.50, similar to the others, the premium binding was a bit more expensive at \$2.25. The sales page on the back runs through McKinley’s life and features some aspects that were not as prominent in other books, including his Civil War days, the McKinley Tariff, and the Spanish-American War. It claims the book is a “complete, accurate, and official volume.”²³

The table of contents reveals how the book begins with McKinley’s assassination, followed by several chapters on the aftermath, anarchy, and Czolgosz and Goldman, before moving into McKinley’s biography. This table of contents is much more detailed and is much more partisan. For instance, one chapter is devoted to “McKinley’s loyalty to Sherman, Blaine, and Harrison,” placing him clearly within Republican politics.²⁴ Several pages from this chapter also appear in the canvassing book. The contents represented are also very clearly pro-tariff, and compared to the other volumes, contain a great deal of information on the Spanish-American War.²⁵ Chapter 45 is included in its entirety and is merely a list of notable assassinations and assassination attempts, starting with

21. McClure and Morris, *The Authentic Life of William McKinley*, 157.

22. Marshall Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley and Story of his Assassination* (Chicago: The Bible House, 1901).

23. Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley*, [350].

24. Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley*, 13-15.

25. Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley*, 305, 321-331.

George III in 1800 and ending with McKinley.²⁶ There does not seem to be an attempt to connect this list to the anarchist movement.

The final two books place McKinley firmly in the context of Lincoln and Garfield. The first is *McKinley, Garfield, Lincoln: Their Lives - Their Deeds - Their Deaths* by William Dixon Bancroft, while the second is *Our Martyr Presidents: Lincoln : Garfield : McKinley* by John Coulter.²⁷ In the former book, McKinley takes center stage. His photo stands out on the cover, and inside the book, McKinley's life and death are presented first, followed by Garfield, Lincoln, and lastly, a history of anarchy. In the latter book, all three presidents are given equal attention on the cover, with Lincoln first inside, followed by Garfield, then McKinley, and lastly a history of anarchy. Notably, while they may be presented in a different order, based on the descriptions in the table of contents the text is identical. The text selected for the canvassing books also emphasizes different parts of the completed text. Around half of what is included in the Bancroft book is about McKinley's life and death, with the remaining three sections making up the rest. In the Coulter book, which placed McKinley less prominently on the cover, Lincoln and McKinley take up roughly equal space, with less attention devoted to Garfield. Both books contain the same list of assassinations from Marshall Everett's volume, but here they are framed as the actions of anarchists.²⁸ The text placed alongside the list in Coulter's volume emphasizes assassinations in Russia. Meanwhile, in Bancroft's work, there are references to Engels and Marx, "the secure asylum of London" for "speculative anarchy," and the fact that America was "the haven of the social democrats."²⁹ The threat of anarchy seems much closer to the United States in the latter book. These could reflect how the same text was marketed to different

26. Everett, *Complete Life of William McKinley*, 347-349.

27. William Dixon Bancroft, *McKinley, Garfield, Lincoln: Their Lives - Their Deeds - Their Death* (Chicago and New York: United Newspaper Syndicate, 1901); John Coulter, *Our Martyr Presidents: Lincoln : Garfield : McKinley* (n.p.: William D. Warren, 1901).

28. Bancroft, *McKinley, Garfield, Lincoln*, 515-537; Coulter, *Our Martyr Presidents*, 499-506.

29. Coulter, *Our Martyr Presidents*, 499; Bancroft, *McKinley, Garfield, Lincoln*, 515, 537.

audiences (a pro-McKinley audience and a more apathetic one) in the same way the Townsend-Tyler book was advertised.

Overall, a few distinct patterns emerge in these canvassing books. Many of the authors tried to present themselves as close acquaintances of the president, giving their book credibility. In an effort to make McKinley's assassination more marketable, McKinley's life in politics was often deemphasized in place of a focus on his early years, his home life, and his more generic virtues. The McKinley Tariff, his leadership during the Spanish-American War, and Theodore Roosevelt were rarely given significant attention in these canvassing books. Book publishers recognized how they could market the same text to pro-McKinley consumers and those who may have disagreed with his politics. Above all, they sought to make McKinley into a martyr struck down by the scourge of anarchy, making a national hero and an insidious enemy in one fell swoop. By downplaying McKinley's actual achievements, they transformed him from an accomplished, well-respected political leader into someone best remembered for his death. That is the tragedy of these canvassing books: in an attempt to preserve William McKinley's memory, publishers neglected the reasons McKinley should be remembered.

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