

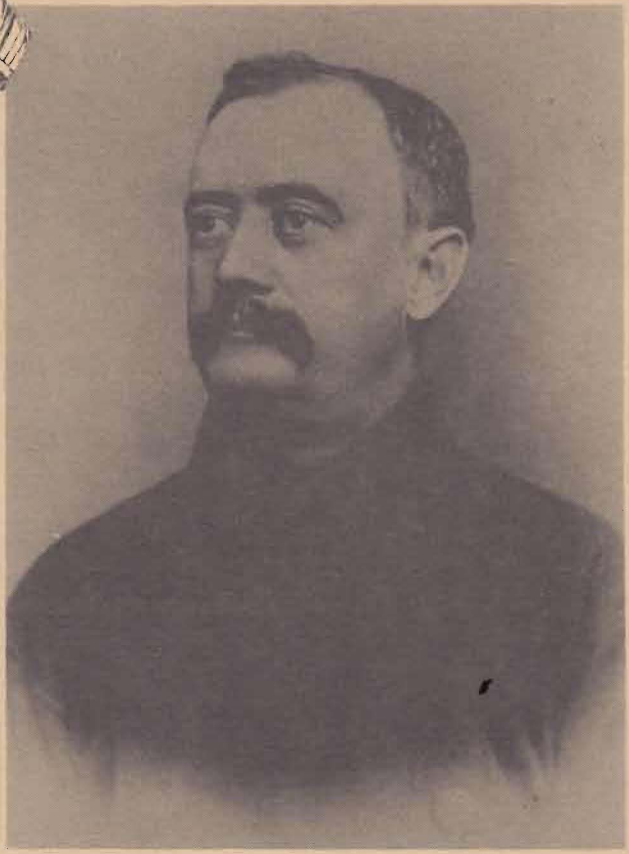
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CHRISTOPHER AUGUSTINE BUCKLEY

BLIND BOSS OF SAN FRANCISCO AND LORD OF LIVERMORE

The Text of a Talk Given by

Dr. William A. Bullough



A CHAPTER OF LIVERMORE HISTORY PRESENTED BY
THE LIVERMORE HERITAGE GUILD

CHRISTOPHER AUGUSTINE BUCKLEY



Christopher Augustine Buckley, the California politico who developed the Ravenswood estate near Livermore, was one of a large group of nineteenth-century American originals. They were called city bosses, and that phrase conjures up an almost universal image. We envision a breed of rather portly individuals, shifty-eyed, probably foreign-born, sporting a derby hat and a glittering stick-pin. We also generally assume that these archetypical politicians exploited the urban masses—mainly immigrants—and manipulated their votes in order to gain the power needed to systematically loot city treasuries. This stereotype is essentially the one created by illustrator Thomas Nast during the crusade against William Marcy Tweed in New York City. For Tweed, it is basically accurate, but it is far from universal. Nor is the remainder of the folklore and demonology surrounding bosses and their machines. The reality is more accurately illustrated by the career of Chris Buckley which fits the stereotype in some respects but departs sharply from it in many more.¹

One of Buckley's inveterate enemies, Jeremiah Lynch, left us a vivid description of the Blind Boss when he was at the peak of his power:

Aided by a sound and logical brain, he is no mean lawyer and can discuss decisions and quote authorities with the best of them. He rarely uses profane language and [despite minimal formal education] he has acquired a suave and polished address, such as properly belongs to one of much travel and refinement. Always carefully dressed in the very extreme of fashion, with a lithe erect person, he looks one full in the face with his large sightless orbs below a smooth and serene forehead, and seems to be all innocence and candor. He wears no beard, and his dark mustache covers a firm mouth, and [he has] a face beaming with intelligence. He speaks with a perfectly distinct and pleasant intonation and in a low tone. He is quite youthful in appearance, and looks in fact, as he goes along the street, arm in arm with his companion, like a quiet, gentlemanly swell of about thirty-five.

Obviously, the portrayal bears little similarity—even in physical terms—to the Nast image of a boss.

When the description was written, Buckley was in his mid-forties and the most powerful figure in California politics, even though he never held or sought public office in his own right. He was always the power behind the throne—the man who made George Hearst a U.S. Senator, who denied offices to others, who advised Grover Cleveland on California affairs, and who attracted the attention of Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Ambrose Bierce,

Lord James Bryce, and many more. He was also the man whom the San Francisco Chinese called *maang paak guai* (blind white devil), whom William Randolph Hearst condemned as an “unconvicted felon,” and whom most San Franciscans recognized as the Blind Boss.

Neither Buckley nor his counterparts in other cities attained this sort of fame, power, and notoriety overnight. In the Blind Boss's case, the climb to the political pinnacles began—certainly without premeditation—almost as soon as he arrived in San Francisco from New York City where he was born in 1845. His parents were working-class Irish immigrants, his father John a stonemason and an inveterate gold-seeker. After several solitary and unsuccessful journeys to the mines of the Golden State, in 1862 he brought his family with him and settled permanently in California.

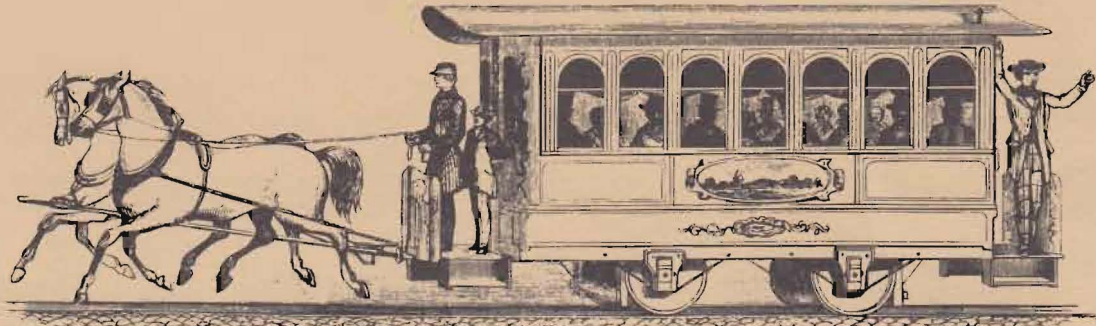
Seventeen-year-old Christopher began his working career almost as soon as he arrived in San Francisco. He became a conductor on one of the city's horsecar railway lines, one which traversed the city from end to end. It meandered from North Beach through the business and entertainment districts and a variety of ethnic neighborhoods, and it terminated in what were then the elite residential regions south of Market Street: South Park and Rincon Hill. From his platform on the horsecar young Chris Buckley acquired his first intimate acquaintance with San Francisco and its populace.

The vantage-point did not satisfy him for long, however. In his memoirs, he observed that:

It was the laudable ambition of aspiring youth to secure a portfolio as a mixologist in one of the great saloons . . . for the opportunity of meeting the great in their hours of relaxation and good humor.

And soon—probably in 1864—Buckley fulfilled that ambition; he became a bartender and bookkeeper in one of the city's most prestigious watering holes. This was The Snug Saloon in the basement of Tom Maguire's New Opera House located at Montgomery and Washington Streets, near the “Monkey Block” and in the heart of the San Francisco business and entertainment districts.

As a “mixologist” there, the young Buckley met his share of the great and near great who haunted the place: financiers, speculators, political leaders, artists



and literati, perhaps even Mark Twain. Under the tutelage of Republican boss Bill Higgins, who regarded him even then as “a handy man behind a ballot box,” he also received his introduction to the intricacies and intrigues of local politics in The Snug. But still he was not content. Therefore, Buckley and a partner opened their own saloon in the Montgomery Block. That enterprise failed within two years, and in 1868 Buckley returned to The Snug, not as a mere “mixologist” but as a partner with the Maguire brothers. He was just twenty-three at the time, and he later summarized his reaction at seeing his name on the saloon sign: “I felt the dignity and power of an independent prince.”

Princely or not, the status did not satisfy the young man’s aspirations. Shortly after the death of his mother Ellen in 1870, Chris Buckley and his father struck out for Vallejo, touted at the time as a terminus for the transcontinental railway and potentially the most important of the Bay Area cities. The dream did not materialize, however, and the disappointed Buckleys returned to San Francisco in 1873. Still, the three years were not entirely wasted. As an active participant in Solano County Republican affairs and as the proprietor of the X-Change Saloon on the waterfront, Chris Buckley increased both the number of his contacts and the depth of his political knowledge.

Both stood him in good stead on his return to San Francisco where he immediately became active in politics—this time as a Democrat. With a series of partners and co-partisans, he opened and operated several saloons and a boardinghouse, aided in the latter venture by his first wife, Sallie. All the while, he continued to advance through the ranks of the Democratic party and finally, in association with a seasoned political veteran, Matt Fallon, he purchased the Alhambra Saloon at Bush and Kearney Streets. During the subsequent 1880s, that establishment would be known as “Buckley’s City Hall.”

As Buckley’s political star rose, however, he suffered a personal tragedy; he went blind. Later, enemies attributed the handicap to overindulgence in the tainted liquor served in his saloons. This is not particularly plausible. No evidence suggests that he served bad booze in any of his establishments. But even if he did, he certainly was not stupid enough to drink it himself. More probably, his affliction resulted from a neurological disorder or perhaps even latent diabetes. Whatever the case, he did not permit blindness to impede his progress in what had become his chosen profession. He compensated by developing other faculties—especially acute hearing and an uncanny memory which allegedly permitted him to recognize individuals by voice or footfall and to resume conversations after interludes of months or even years.

These abilities unquestionably contributed to Buckley’s political ascendancy in the 1870s and 1880s. But there were other factors as well, especially the transformation of the city itself, the Denis Kearney Workingmen’s Party episode of the later 1870s, and the boss’s own sensitivity to the city, its people, and its problems.

Like other American cities, San Francisco was radically changed in the 1860s and 1870s. A population of some 50,000 in 1860 grew to nearly a quarter of a million by 1880. Simultaneously, the constantly heterogeneous populace became socially, ethnically, and economically more diverse than ever. What had been an essentially commercial-mercantile center emerged as an industrial city in the matter of a decade. Speculative ventures based on railroads, industry, Comstock silver, and expanding California agriculture reinforced the boom-and-bust nature of the economy. Great fortunes were made—and lost—seemingly overnight. All the while, a steady stream of newcomers from the eastern states and overseas reinforced the hordes of disappointed farmers and gold-seekers who settled in the city annually. And technological innovations—especially in building techniques and transportation—transformed the physical and demographic patterns of the city.

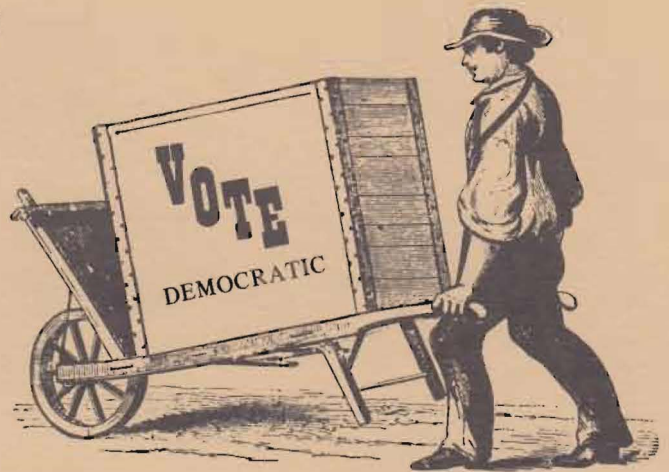
Rapid change strained San Francisco's private and public resources, particularly a political system which was incapable of response. The Consolidation Act of 1856, written for a compact town of some 30,000 was a hopelessly obsolete charter for a sprawling city of over 200,000. It was amended and re-amended, almost beyond recognition. Indeed, when civic leaders attempted to codify the charter in the 1870s, they found that the original document could be printed in just thirteen pages, but a maze of ordinances and amendments—often obscure in origin and contradictory in implications—required over 200 pages. Such a system of government, confused and decentralized, provided no basis for response to the urgent needs of a changing city. That would be the function of the Blind Boss.

He was aided in the enterprise by a virtually unregulated system of partisan politics, also based upon the realities of the town rather than the city. As Buckley described it, San Francisco politics was a "go-as-you-please affair, . . . simply another form of private enterprise." Registrations, nominations, ballot printing and counting, and virtually all similar activities were simply left to the parties, which were numerous—as many as a dozen in the field at once—and potentially profitable. Many were simply "piece clubs" which appeared at election time to cash in. Again, Buckley's description is appropriate:

[A]ny group of cheap skates could assemble in a back room, create a sham party with a high-sounding name, and claim to have four or five thousand voters . . . with this for an asset, [they] could sally forth and mace candidates of the regular parties out of large sums for nominations or endorsements.

Obviously, without direction the partisan system was no more capable of response to pressing problems than was the municipal government itself.


Together, the urban change and political impotence contributed to the second development which led to Buckley's rise to power: Denis Kearney and the Workingmen's Party of California. Volumes have been written about the episode. Suffice it to say here that Kearney's anti-Chinese and anti-establishment agitation had great appeal to members of the working class who came to the state with high hopes and found themselves the victims of an erratic economy and ignored by unresponsive government. The WPC attracted members of all parties, but hit the Democracy hardest.



The San Francisco party counted some 25,000 adherents in the mid-1870s but only 2,000 in 1880. As Buckley put it, "scarce a grease spot of its former strength." Indeed, in the elections of 1881 no Democrat won election to municipal office.

Obviously, the party required reorganization and rejuvenation. The reason that a committee of fifty partisan and civic leaders selected Chris Buckley for the job involves the third major factor in his rise to power: his thorough knowledge of politics and his sensitivity to the city and its people. As a horsecar conductor, behind the bar at The Snug, as the proprietor of several other saloons, and as an apprentice to a series of established politicians, he had prepared himself thoroughly. He had served his journeyman years moving through the ranks of the party and supporting it even in the adversity of his blindness and the WPC years. In short, when the committee of notables tapped him to reorganize and lead the San Francisco Democracy, he had mastered his profession, politics, and he was ready to be a boss.

His approach to party reorganization reveals just how well he had learned. The most pressing and immediate needs were for voters and their votes. To secure them, Buckley restructured the Democracy on the basis of forty-seven neighborhood or precinct clubs. Under the jurisdiction of a city-wide central committee composed of representatives of the clubs, these units would register Democrats, organize primary elections, select delegates to municipal conventions, and weld together a coterie of reliable voters. To appeal to a broad spectrum of the urban populace, especially the working classes, the clubs had to be more than ideologically partisan associations. They also functioned as social organizations (with plenty of offices) and as employment agencies for those with few other resources. They



constituted welfare centers to aid needy members in various emergencies, at a time when few other agencies in the city served this purpose. They sponsored a host of activities to alleviate the drabness of urban life: family picnics, dances, rifle clubs, uniformed drill teams, marching bands, and the like. All of these were substantially more important to the majority of San Franciscans than were ideologies and partisan philosophies. Just how important—and how well Buckley understood the city—is confirmed by two points: Democratic registrations soared in 1882 and in that year's election the party swept every municipal office and most of the city's legislative delegation. That victory firmly established the Blind Boss and his machine.

To sustain both, Buckley and his lieutenants employed a variety of methods. Neither was averse to manipulating votes on occasion, sometimes by extremely creative means. The tickets of rival parties could be forged—with Democratic candidates on them. And since the motto was “vote early and vote often,” beards sprouted as repeaters made the rounds, brothels and saloons emptied, and—miracle of miracles—cemeteries gave up their dead to cast their votes. On one occasion, it is alleged that the boss's lieutenants voted the crews of several French men-of-war at anchor in the bay.

But such tactics probably were rarely necessary. For one thing, the clubs kept Democrats loyal and active. In addition, the Blind Boss's tickets were appealing. They consisted not of party hacks but of respected members of the community, usually drawn from the middle echelons of the business community and usually with broad appeal. Raphael Weill, a Buckley candidate for school director, is a good example. As an owner of the successful White House drygoods chain, a practicing Jew, and the son of French parents, he was a triple threat at the polls. Incidentally, he was a solid performer in office and now has a school named after him.

Still, votes were the key to success and the clubs were the keys to votes. Apparently they did the job well; over ninety percent of those eligible regularly voted in municipal elections in the 1880's. But they also were expensive to maintain, and their support came principally from the legitimate business community. Like other nineteenth-century cities, San Francisco offered great opportunities to those who could furnish growing urban populations with water, transportation, shelter, and the like. But the impotence and incomprehensibility of local govern-

ment also could inhibit opportunities. Therefore, entrepreneurs turned eagerly to politicians like the Blind Boss. And they were only too willing to pay handsomely for the privilege of doing business in San Francisco.

Buckley was their broker, their intermediary with city hall. He collected “fees” (we would call them bribes) for his services in securing contracts, franchises, licenses, and other favors. The amounts involved often were substantial enough to confirm the boss's own self-assessment: “I placed a stiff value on my services and always rated myself as a high-priced man.” That was accurate. In just one transaction, for example, two utility companies paid Buckley over \$100,000 for franchises to operate for a single year. The sum confirms two facts. First, Buckley certainly was a high-priced man. Second, there was a great deal of money to be made in San Francisco in the 1880s.

In this and similar transactions, however, the Blind Boss could not simply pocket the money. A substantial portion went to the cooperative municipal officials who granted the favors. Even more had to go back into party coffers to finance the clubs and other activities which assured the all-important success at the polls. This is not to say that Buckley did not profit from politics. He retained a portion of the “fees” he collected, but he also benefited less directly. He used inside information to make wise investments (he called them “certainties”) which rewarded him handsomely. Those rewards allowed him, after 1885, to marry a Boston socialite (Elizabeth Hurley) after his first wife died, to move to the fashionable Western Addition after selling the Alhambra Saloon, to buy Ravenswood, to become a world traveler, and to acquire a reputation as a shrewd businessman, if not a place in the *San Francisco Blue Book*, the social register of the city.

The same success also may have contributed to the Blind Boss's political demise. As his fortune grew, he began to lose intimate touch with his constituency and to move in aristocratic circles. No longer found readily in the cluttered office in the Alhambra, he instead lounged in the more fashionable Manhattan Club at the foot of Nob Hill. Indeed, he spent much of his time entirely away from the city in travel and at Ravenswood. And by the time he married his third wife (Annie Marie Hurley, a cousin of Elizabeth) in 1890, his associates were complaining of his absences. One of them, perhaps his closest lieutenant Sam Rainey, commented:



BUGKLEY WOULD NOW A FARMER BE.

Cartoon from the San Francisco Examiner - October 2, 1896

For the past year he has not paid as close attention to the minor details of politics as he should have. You hear a great deal of grumbling . . . that [he] does not pay as much attention to his old friends as he used to. The ward workers say that they can't go and talk to him now.

In short, Buckley began to neglect the principal sources of his authority and power.

Success contributed to the Blind Boss's downfall in yet another way, one which confirmed the dictum that power begets enemies. Throughout the 1880s, fellow-Democrats whom he called "soreheads" besieged his position and sought to dethrone him. That contingent included old-timers whom he had displaced, office seekers

whom he had denied, and newcomers and former allies eager for their own places in the party. By 1890, opposition to the Blind Boss had solidified, and after a disastrous defeat at the polls, the "soreheads" had decided that "Buckley must go" in the name of "reform." During the following year, a former ally--Judge William T. Wallace--formed a grand jury packed with the boss's enemies, and it handed down an indictment against him for bribery. Subsequently, the state supreme court declared both the jury and its actions illegal, but the damage was done. As a result of the investigation and the adverse publicity it generated, especially in William Randolph

Hearst's *Examiner*, Buckley never again exercised authority in city or state politics.

Following the grand jury episode, the Blind Boss began to spend more of his time at his beloved Ravenswood, especially after the birth of his son, Christopher Jr., in London in 1893. During the 1890s, the Buckleys became semi-permanent residents of Livermore, along with a substantial contingent of relatives and retainers and a constant flow of guests. At home, the boss doted on his wife and son. Simultaneously, he assumed an active and intelligent role in the viticultural activities of the valley. Young Christopher attended kindergarten in the town and participated in the activities of the community, as did his parents. And the boss himself received the title—from one journalist, at least—“Lord of Livermore.”

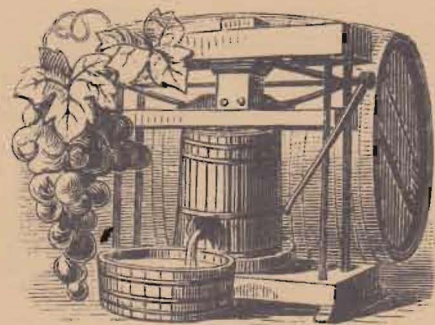
Buckley's affluence and authority, however, were not principally products of his activities in the valley. He continued to invest in a variety of business enterprises and especially in real estate in San Francisco and Los Angeles. By 1906, he was the owner of a six-story office building on Market Street and the mansion of silver-baron John W. Mackay, the family's San Francisco home. Unfortunately, these and other properties were uninsured, and the earthquake and fire dealt Buckley's fortunes a severe blow.

In the wake of the 1906 disaster, the Buckleys became almost full-time residents in Livermore. There young Christopher completed high school in 1910; subsequently, he went on to the University of California and Boalt Hall College of Law and a stint in the Navy during World War I. During this same period, the senior Buckley managed to recoup his fortune so that when he died in 1922, he left an estate valued at nearly \$1,000,000. Thereby, he confirmed his own observation: “It was only after I retired from politics that I learned for the first time what making money really was.”

Thus, the career of Christopher Augustine Buckley both affirms and contradicts stereotyped impressions of the nineteenth-century boss. He did build his power on the basis of working-class and immigrant votes, but he did not buy or steal them. Instead they were given in return for services rendered in the interest of the voters, a *quid pro quo*. He did accept “fees” for favors to business interests, but they too were—in most cases—willingly rendered as “business expenses.” Buckley did become wealthy through politics, but

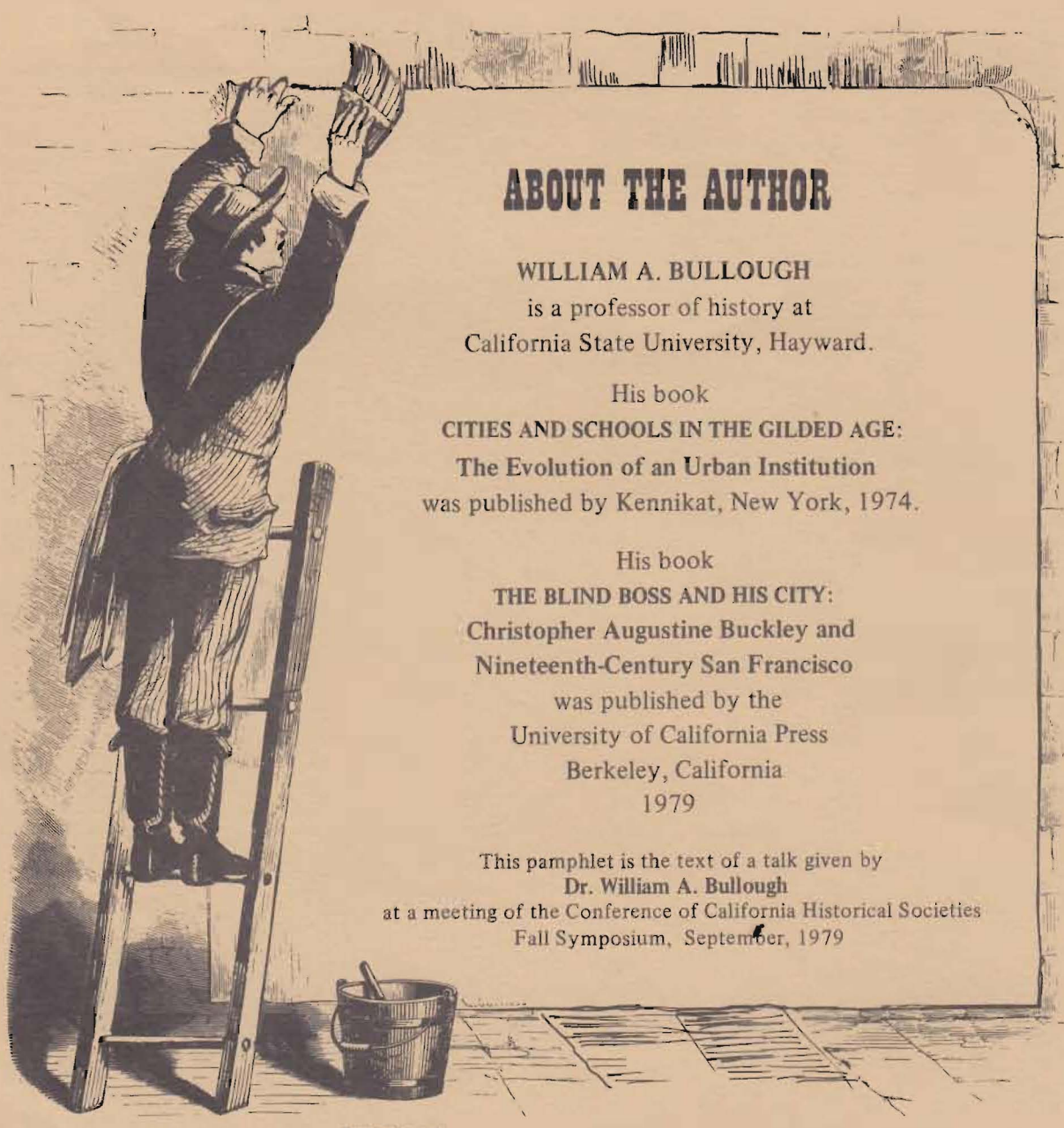
not entirely through raids on the treasury or by bleeding taxpayers. Indeed, during his regime, the city tax rate stood at an enviable one-dollar-per-hundred of assessed valuation. He was not an insensitive ogre who exploited the poor; instead his charitable commitments nearly impoverished his widow in the first year after his death.

Buckley was certainly not a saint; he probably broke some laws and severely bent others—although he never lost a court case brought against him, even in Judge Wallace's court. And as one of his contemporaries, Martin Kelly, observed, “It is difficult to canonize a boss.” On the other hand, neither was he an unmitigated devil as much of the folklore surrounding him suggests. Instead, he was a shrewd professional politician and businessman who, for nearly a decade, gave the city what it wanted and perhaps needed at that historical moment. He did not exist in a vacuum; nor did he create the setting which allowed him to exist. Like other bosses of his time, he emerged because there was a need for what he provided. To paraphrase Voltaire, if there had been no Christopher Augustine Buckley, nineteenth-century San Francisco would have had to invent one.



1. For documentation and additional detail, see three works by William A. Bullough: “The Blind Boss and His City: Christopher Augustine Buckley and Nineteenth-Century San Francisco” Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; “Hannibal versus the Blind Boss: Chris Buckley, the ‘Junta’, and Democratic Reform Politics in San Francisco,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 46, May 1977; “The Steam Beer Handicap: Chris Buckley and the San Francisco Municipal Election of 1896,” *California Historical Quarterly*, 54, Fall 1975.

Also see Alexander B. Callow, Jr., “San Francisco's Blind Boss,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 25, August 1956.



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His book
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