

Noble Norman

Floored three times, Candidate Thomas steps out again to take it on the jaw.

"I have about as much chance of ending up in the White House," he says, "as I would have of flattening Joe Louis with a haymaker." But you've got to hand it to him for trying



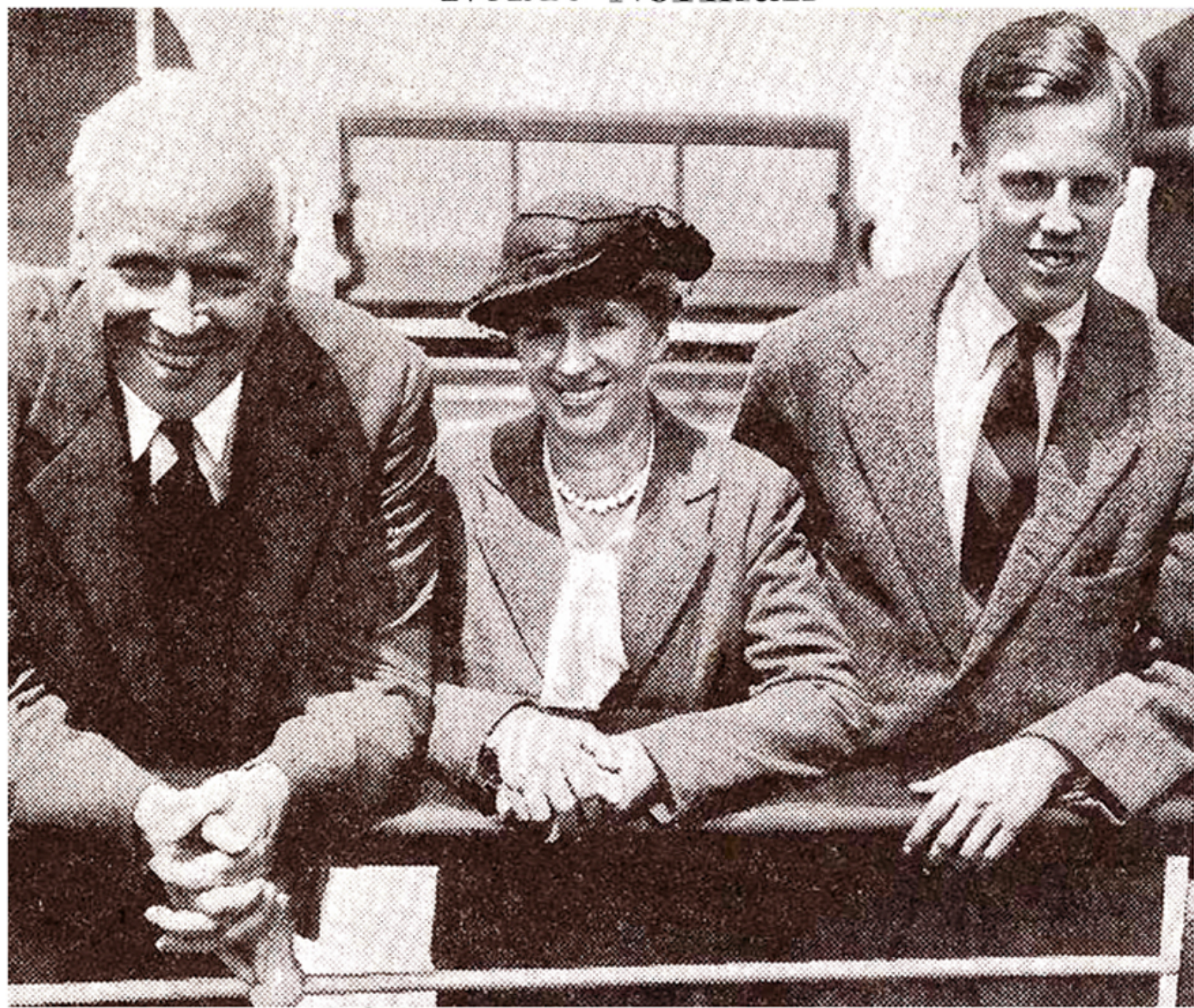
by William A. H. Birnie

WHEN the two major candidates for the presidency set out on their stately cross-country tours, sure to be greeted with brass bands and crowds at every whistle-stop, they will be followed, at a respectful distance, by another candidate—a mild-mannered, white-haired, professorial Socialist who boasts more experience at rough-tough campaigning than both his big brothers put together.

The little guy is Norman Mattoon Thomas, 55, an ex-Presbyterian preacher who in twenty years of running for office has kept busier than a short-order cook, without ever being elected so much as a dogcatcher. Today he is out for the presidency for the fourth consecutive time, but he grins with a grin that "I have about as much chance of ending up in the White House as I would have of flattening Joe Louis with a haymaker."

For the Republican and Democratic standard bearers, a speech is something you simply stand up and deliver. But for Thomas every speech is a nerve-racking adventure. Flying fists often interrupt his placid sentences, although Thomas himself is a consistent pacifist and deplores bloody noses. Trouble is

Noble² Norman



Back from Russia, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, shown on shipboard with their son, William, reported disappointment in the Soviet experiment

that he faces enemies on both his right and left flanks. Conservatives damn him because he is a revolutionist. Communists damn him because he is such a gentle, bourgeois revolutionist.

Jersey City, N. J., police hustled him out of town not long ago when he tried to address a Socialist meeting. To Thomas that was a challenge of his constitutional right of free speech, and, pacifist or not, he never backs down on that issue. A few weeks later, against the advice of his well-wishers, he showed up in near-by Newark, N. J., to deliver the identical speech.

He never did—but not for lack of trying. He climbed up on the platform, surveyed a few hundred faithful followers, brushed a couple of strands of hair back over his domed head, and shouted, “Comrades . . .”

At that instant fifty men marched into the park on the heels of a military band. Ripe tomatoes, rotten eggs, and a couple of discarded flashlight bulbs sailed through the air. Few of them missed their target. From a tall, scholarly, deliberate lecturer, Thomas was transformed into a ludicrous, pathetic figure, his forehead bleeding, his clothes dripping. He tried to go on, but the band struck up gleefully *Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here*.

Mounted police feared a riot, and dragged him, still protesting, from the platform. But Thomas got in a typical and triumphant last crack. As he was being led away, jeers echoing in his ears, he turned suddenly, drew himself up, wiped tomato stains from his mouth, and called out with dignity to the musicians: “I hope you gentlemen are receiving union wages.”

Oddly enough, after being in the thick of every major labor battle for the last two decades, after being arrested more times than he can remember, Thomas still has the air of a prosperous preacher. His thin nose and blue-gray eyes would suit a poet laureate. Even in groups of two or three he talks in ringing tones and strides back and forth, pulpit-style, as he expounds some favorite Socialist doctrine, like “Production for use, not profit.” His personal habits are clerically ascetic. He seldom smokes or drinks. He could no more slap a stranger on the back to win his vote than he could pose for a picture with a fish he hadn’t caught.

Personally, I have no intention of voting for Thomas for President. Never has

Noble³ Norman

more than one in every 45 voters okayed at the polls his theories of public ownership and operation of basic industries, drastic increases in taxation, and a graduated capital levy. His presidential vote jumped from 267,000 in 1928 to a peak of 884,000 in 1932, then dropped off to 187,000 in 1936. This year, with the New Deal still stealing much of his thunder on the left, he will probably squirm through the No Man's Land between the Republican and Democratic forces with about the same-sized platoon at his heels. But, *(Continued on page 113)* political theories aside, I can't help but admire the determination of this perennial also-ran, who stands up to more nasty epithets, more muttered warnings to get the hell out of town, more flying missiles than almost any other American politician.

That determination springs from an unquenchable idealism: the same self-sacrifice that keeps busy housewives serving term after term on your local school board without thought of recompense, the same devotion to service that fires Gandhi in his unequal struggle for Indian independence. Misguided or not, it was honest idealism that made Thomas kick over the traces of a comfortable, conventional career in the church to join the crusade for an unpopular political doctrine.

If it hadn't been for the World War Thomas would probably be occupying the plush pulpit of a fashionable New York church today. Son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers and missionaries, he was born, eldest of six children, in a stern Calvinistic household in Marion, Ohio. One of his earliest memories is of a grandfather, past eighty, who faced death by thanking God he was "allowed to die from the feet up, rather than from the head down."

As a youngster he peddled newspapers for another distinguished son of Marion, Warren G. Harding, publisher of the *Marion Star*, of whom he observed later: "The trouble with Harding was that, when he dressed up, he looked like the great American tradition of a statesman."

When his father switched to a church in Lewisburg, Pa., young Thomas studied for a year at Bucknell University; then transferred to conservative, exclusive Princeton University, where he met his bills through the generosity of a distant relative and his own extracurricular tutoring of dullards. Shy and studious, Tommy, as he was called then, was one of the tallest men in his class and the best debater. The day of his graduation, in 1905, he won a debate over Raymond B. Fosdick, now president of the Rockefeller Foundation, by arguing the prophetic thesis that "municipal governments should own their street railway systems." (Years later Fosdick was instrumental in persuading the Princeton trustees to grant Thomas an honorary degree, although he had been discouraged from speaking on the hallowed campus for a decade.) Thomas's contemporaries elected him the brightest man in his class, and, like most of the rest of them, he listed his political convictions as Republican.

FOR ten years after graduation he sailed on serenely into the ministry. He worked in settlement houses in New York for \$500 a year. He was assistant pastor at a "silk stocking" church under the eminent Dr. Henry van Dyke. He traveled around the world as untrained nurse for an elderly philanthropist. He was graduated with honors from Union Theological Seminary. He was married to Frances Violet Stewart, herself a social worker, and a Princeton classmate who had just purchased a seat on the



New York Stock Exchange was one of his ushers. Evenings, he entertained his friends by performing on the flute and exercising his rich bass voice. At thirty, Tommy was fast settling into orthodox respectability.

THEN came the war, a soul-searing crisis which ended this complacent existence.

He was then pastor of an uptown New York church that carried on settlement work among immigrants. Convinced of the social justice of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," he came out flat-footed for pacifism, helped organize committees to preach pacifism and protect pacifists. He was exempt from the draft because he already had four children, but something snapped within him when a brother, now a New York doctor, was sentenced to Fort Leavenworth for defying conscription. So one night he had a long talk with Mrs. Thomas after the children had gone to bed.

"Other preachers are turning militant," he said. "They are telling people that it's righteous to go to war, to kill their enemies. I can't do that. It isn't my kind of Christianity."

"Yes," Mrs. Thomas said. "Go on."

"The people who give money to my parish are beginning to complain about me. They don't want a pacifist for a preacher. But I can't change my beliefs. I'm more interested in the downtrodden than in doctrines."

He took a deep breath.

"Do you know what I should do?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Thomas softly, "I do."

That was all the encouragement he needed. Next day he resigned from his parish to devote his full energies to working with his Socialist friends. Although he didn't formally quit the ministry until after his mother died in 1931, he must have realized at the time that he was turning his back on a promising career to join a doomed battalion. In 1918 Socialism offered little future for an ambitious young man.

Once his mind was made up, Thomas plunged into the fight for what he believed to be inevitable social reforms. After editing a few left-wing periodicals, he started running for office in 1924, making an inauspicious debut by campaigning for Governor of New York against Al Smith.

One day in 1926 he traveled to a New Jersey town, to protest "unconstitutional police measures" to end a textile strike. About 10 p. m. the telephone rang in his apartment, and Mrs. Thomas hastened nervously to answer it. "Hello," said a strange voice, "do you know where your husband is now?"

Mrs. Thomas, long since resigned to the fact that she was no longer a preacher's wife, sighed faintly. "In jail some place, I suppose."

A pause—then: "How did you know? Mr. Thomas asked me to break the news to you."

The news was this: Thomas had addressed the strikers from the crotch of an apple tree, while local deputies high-jumped for his long, lanky legs. Finally one of them caught

Noble Norman⁵

hold, hauled him down, and marched him off to jail. There, he was charged with unlawful assembly, and next day released under bail of \$10,000. Delighted with an opportunity to make a test case, Thomas demanded to be put on trial time and again. But, five months later, the grand jury refused to indict him. He felt he had been cheated.

In 1929, running for Mayor of New York, Thomas made one of his biggest political splurges. Swinging out at Tammany politics, he denounced the administration on the following fronts, to select a few: prisons, police, magistrates, taxi system, undertaking fees, hospitals, markets, milk prices, and school ventilation. Three conservative newspapers and a dozen prominent citizens like the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Rev. John Haynes Holmes spoke kind words for him, but he ended up, as usual, an unrepentant also-ran.



IF THOMAS were more practical and less idealistic he might long since have washed his hands of the Socialist party, a loose-knit organization which hard-boiled politicians dismiss as high-minded and ineffectual. Its doctrine is evolution rather than revolution, and, come the revolution, the members seem to envision the streets running, not with blood, but with the milk of human kindness.

The other night I attended a Socialist meeting. The chairman called us to order three quarters of an hour late, with 17 members scattered through the drafty hall. Three stolid housewives knitted sweaters, and a young couple in front of me held hands and whispered throughout the proceedings. To me, an outsider, the scene seemed more like a session of a literary society than a revolutionary meeting. When the chairman called for volunteers to distribute leaflets for Thomas's current campaign, two women and one man raised their hands lackadaisically. There was scarcely more excitement when he referred to campaign contributions.

I understood then why Thomas travels in upper berths when he is campaigning, why he dictates to his wife most of his correspondence and speeches. "We're aiming for a \$100,000 campaign fund, but we'll be lucky to get half of that," he told me later. "We stumbled along on about \$30,000 in 1936."

Perhaps one reason why Thomas has never succeeded in firing the imagination of the masses is that he is far removed from the dispossessed and underprivileged for whom he is fighting. One prominent liberal quit the Socialist party, explaining that "Thomas

Noble⁶ Norman

is too much of a Groton boy.” The Thomases make no secret of the fact that, financially, life has dealt kindly with them. Although he hasn’t accepted any salary for nearly ten years, Thomas earns more than pin money from lecturing at colleges and liberal clubs, and his numerous books and pamphlets bring in steady royalties. Mrs. Thomas may have inherited an independent streak from her distant ancestor, Anne Hutchinson, the early American nonconformist, but, more to the point, she inherited a comfortable trust fund from her grandfather, which relieves her husband of the normal responsibility of providing for a family.

It’s ironic that, without the capitalistic feathers in his wife’s nest, Thomas would have had much less time to plug Socialism.

Until this year the Thomases summered in their Cold Springs, L. I., country house, where, to the delight of caricaturists, they lived strangely like economic royalists, with Mrs. Thomas raising full-blooded cocker spaniels, and the Socialist leader supervising cows and chickens in his spare time. Recently they rented the place. Now that their five children have grown up, they have also given up their town house— “The bank took it for the mortgage,” shrugs Thomas— and moved into a cozy apartment just outside New York’s fashionable Gramercy Square district.

FIRST time I was there, cultured Mrs. Thomas, surrounded by overstuffed chairs and pastoral paintings, poured tea from a graceful silver service, and I had the feeling she performed the same rites every afternoon.

“Of course, Norman and I have been fortunate,” Mrs. Thomas told me. “My legacy enabled us to give our children the very best school and college educations available. But, the way we look at it, everyone should enjoy by right the advantages we have enjoyed through good fortune.”

She said it with such quiet assurance that I, for one, am perfectly sure she meant every word of it.

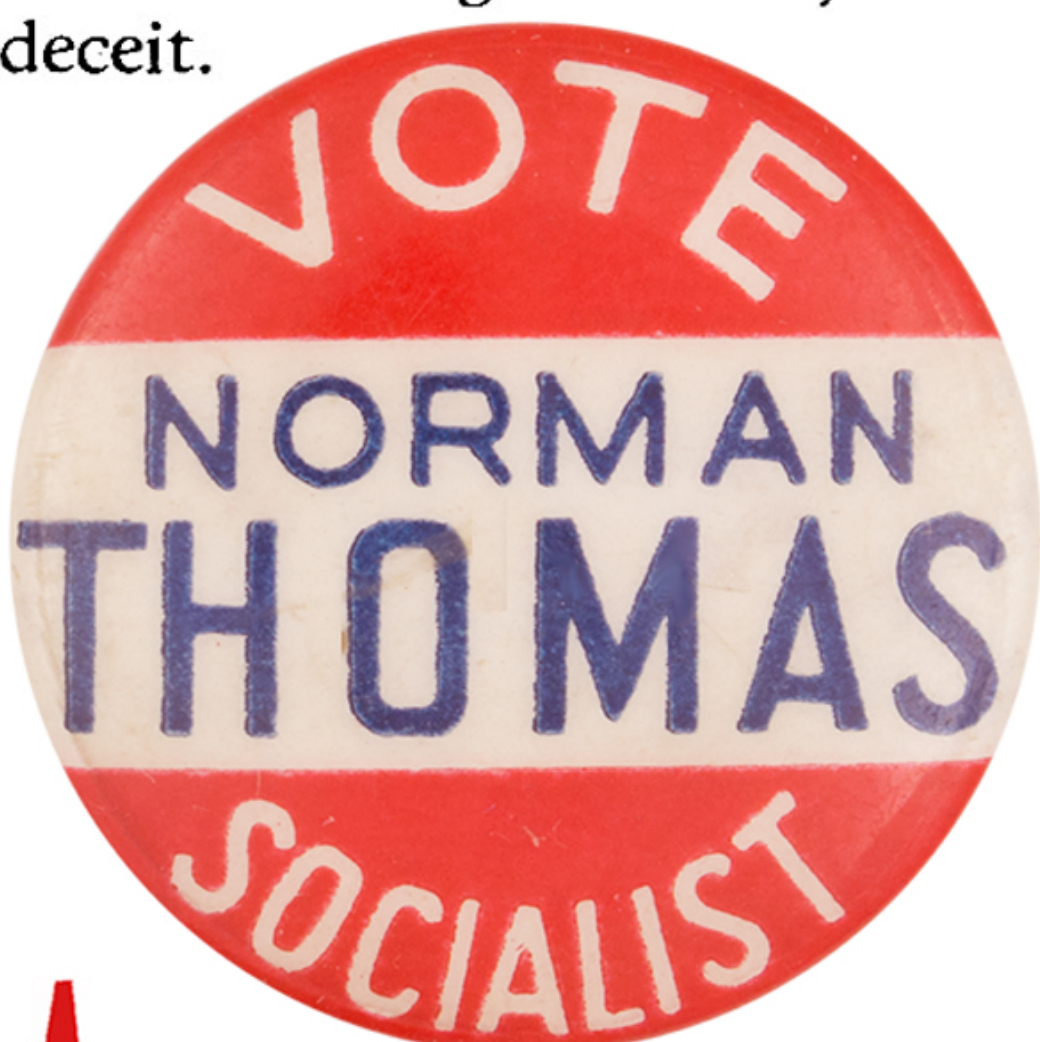
Opponents label Thomas an immaculate idealist, an enraptured Socialist, a visionary academician, but few of them question his sincerity or honesty.

“Politically, Thomas is dangerous,” a banker told me recently, “but, personally, I’d trust him with the key to my safe-deposit box.”

“He’s a softie,” said a Communist, “but we could never dig up any dirt about him.”

“He cuts into the liberal vote,” said a New Dealer. “He should have stayed in the church.”

As long as every system of government is bound to produce individuals who want to upset the social applecart, I believe that a revolutionist like Thomas, who fights clean and aboveboard for what he believes to be just, is infinitely superior to those who bore from within through violence, intimidation, and deceit.



THE American

JULY • 1940

OldMagazineArticles.com