

PAST PERFECT

A Religion of Freedom: Ingersoll's Cane and Thomas Paine

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"Thomas Paine"

Robert Green Ingersoll

"This man had gratified no ambition at the expense of his fellow men; he had desolated no country with the flame and sword of war; he had not wrung millions from the poor and unfortunate; he had betrayed no trust, and yet he was almost universally despised. He gave his life for the benefit of mankind. Day and night for many, many weary years, he labored for the good of others, and gave himself body and soul to the great cause of human liberty. And yet he won the hatred of the people for whose benefit, for whose emancipation, for whose civilization, for whose exaltation he gave his life. . . .

His arguments were so lucid, so unanswerable, his comparisons and analogies so apt, so unexpected, that they excited the passionate admiration of friends and the unquenchable hatred of enemies. So great were these appeals to patriotism, to the love of liberty, the pride of independence, the glory of success, that it was said by some of the best and greatest of that time that the American cause owed as much to the pen of Paine as to the sword of Washington. . . .

He had published his thoughts on religion and had appealed to reason, to the light in every mind, to the humanity, the pity, the goodness which he believed to be in every heart. He denied the right of kings to make laws and of priests to make creeds. He insisted that the people should make laws, and that every human being should think for himself. While some believed in the freedom of religion, he believed in the religion of freedom. . . .

[If the people only knew that] he could truthfully say, 'The world is my country, to do good my religion.'"

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IN A CORNER OF A CREAKY OLD ROOM in a restored white house with green trim on a quiet street in Dresden, New York, sits a glass display case with some faded photos and letters by and about Robert Green Ingersoll. This house, a short way from Seneca Lake, was the house where he was born in August of 1833. In the back of the glass case is a twisted walking stick claimed to be used by Ingersoll in his advanced age. Its brass top looks ideal for rapping a podium while preaching the secular gospel of humanity.

The great agnostic orator's honorific essay "Thomas Paine" is exceptional in part due to its proximity to his eulogy for his other hero, Whitman, only four months earlier. Like Whitman, Ingersoll recognized a uniquely radical mind in Paine that was a virtual walking stick near at hand, ready to steady the republic. Indeed, as Ingersoll was keen to repeat many times over, the old creeds and canons were dying and a more balancing canon of Reason was being taken up by a more enlightened and sturdy, self-reliant age. Our natural canonical scripture would open with the apostle Paine, the "true soldier of liberty."

Among all his other contributions to NAR, Ingersoll places one name, one man: Paine. Voice of revolution in both government and God—or at least in Religion—Paine had been defined by his enemies, a wrong his famous disciple aimed to correct. Whitman, Edison and others lionized and eulogized the great forgotten founder, and another famously infamous orator, Ernestine Rose, went so far as to proclaim that Paine needs no eulogy because his devotion to the cause of freedom was monument enough.

Ingersoll was agitated that the author of "Common Sense," "American Crisis,"

"Rights of Man" and various early articles attacking slavery and championing women's rights, was relentlessly defamed long after his death. Of course, Ingersoll was much more popular because he was much more entertaining—drawing criticism, he also drew laughs—than the acid-penned author of "The Age of Reason."

"Thomas Paine," written seven years before Ingersoll's death, stands as a tribute to both infidels who were neither atheists nor antireligious. Certainly antipathetic to superstitious nonsense, Ingersoll and his heretic hero shared a gift for stirring the public through pen or podium.

As Susan Jacoby says it, "[One] of Ingersoll's lasting accomplishments as the preeminent American orator of his era was the revival of Paine in the historical imagination." As New York was characterized as the "burned over" region after the fiery tent revivals of the early-nineteenth century, it seems fitting to refer to Ingersoll's revival of our founding heretic who "preached a gospel" proclaiming a "Religion" of humanity and freedom transcending sectarian distractions.

When my wife and I visited Dresden this summer, we initially drove right by the man's house. Easy to miss. Just as he continues to be overlooked by most. Just as Paine suffers the same fate. Yet it may be truer to state the suffering as *our* fate, if we ignore both their voices. The foes of freethought (often the fearfully faithful) continue to shout their orthodoxy at our ears and shake our feet. It may help to pick up Ingersoll's twisted old walking stick, to hold the "sacred secular" ground of Truth, and use it to point the way forward, raising Paine as sure as he was raising cane. □

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