

Who Was Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899)? ¹

by Irwin Spiegelman

Ingersoll, known as the *Great Agnostic*, was America's most famous orator during the Gilded Age stretching roughly from the end of the Civil War to the first decade of the 20th century. This period is also seen as the *Golden Age of Freethinking*, when many observers wrongly believed that dogmatic, fundamentalist religion was in decline in America. Today, staunch Bible literalists are a very powerful minority in America and have virtually taken over the Republican Party and are aggressively fighting America's Culture Wars with no religious and political holds barred.



The Early Years

Robert Ingersoll was born in 1833 in Dresden NY, on the banks of Lake Seneca, one of the Finger Lakes, the son of a fiery Congregational minister, who was an abolitionist and a firm liberal thinker, who very often found himself in conflict with his congregations. As Robert and his brother, Ebon, and sister, Sue, were growing up, their father moved to more than a dozen church positions extending from New York to Michigan. His mother, Mary Livingstone Ingersoll, died when Robert was two years old. With the family perpetually on the move, the children had little formal education.

He and his brother ended up in Marion, Illinois, near the Kentucky border, reading law at the law office of the local Democratic Congressman. Both were admitted to the bar in 1854 and in the winter of 1857-8 moved their office north to Peoria, where they developed a thriving practice and were deeply immersed in politics. In 1860, Robert lost running as a Democrat for Congress. In 1862 he married Eva Parker, from a freethinking and abolitionist family. They had two daughters.

Robert Ingersoll entered the Civil War as a Stephen A. Douglas Democrat and emerged from the war as a strong supporter of Abraham Lincoln and the radical Republicans. At the start of the war he raised and commanded the 11th regiment of the Illinois volunteer cavalry which fought in the battle of Shiloh, April, 1862. Captured by Confederate forces in December of that year, he was shortly paroled, allowed to return home, promising not to fight.

In 1864, His brother Ebon was elected to the Congress in a special election in which Robert made dozens of speeches for his campaign. Two years later, Ingersoll and gubernatorial candidate, Richard Oglesby, often spoke in tandem and were considered the best stump speakers in the country. And in 1868, Robert ran for governor as a Republican but lost. Gov. Oglesby appointed him Illinois Attorney-General, the only political office he was to hold.

The Making of the *Great Agnostic*

Before 1868, Ingersoll kept his religious skepticism out of his popular speeches and concentrated on patriotic themes. In an 1868 Decoration Day address he said, "Human Liberty is the shrine at which I worship. Progress is the religion in which I believe. Liberty is the condition precedent to all progress." Quoted by Martin Plummer from the *Peoria Daily Transcript*, June, 1868. In Jan., 1872, a Thomas Paine celebration [it looks like it was a Paine birthday gathering--I.S.] in Fairbury, Illinois, about 60 miles due east of Peoria, marked Ingersoll's first public assault on religion, according to Plummer. "An honest God is the noblest work of Man," is a quotation from Ingersoll's 1874 book, *The Gods and Other Lectures*. At this time he characterized himself as an "infidel" or "heretic."

In 1877 Ingersoll moved to Washington, DC at the urging of his brother and continued his lucrative law practice and his extensive lecture tours until the Ingersolls moved to a town house at Gramercy Park in Manhattan in 1885. Just prior to his death in 1899 he and Eva moved in with one of their daughters, living in Dobbs Ferry NY. His ashes and those of his wife are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. In 1911, a Robert Ingersoll Statue was dedicated at Glen Oak Park in Peoria.

Where Ingersoll Stood on Freethought, Secularism and Religion

After 1859, Freethinkers split over Darwin's theory of evolution. Ingersoll was in the radical humanist, natural rights camp espoused by his hero, Thomas Paine. Many other Freethinkers, however, were attracted to the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. In America, Yale economics professor William Graham Sumner called for an unbridled free market economy, dominated by those who were able to succeed. These ideas were to be expressed by Ayn Rand in the 20th century and later by extreme Libertarians.

Ingersoll was a strong promoter of science, technology, and the scientific method, all to be put to the task of providing the good life for all mankind.

Despite his focus on Agnosticism (by the way, Ingersoll said numerous times that he saw no difference between agnosticism and atheism) and attacking dogmatic religion in his speeches since 1872, he not only remained extremely popular wherever he spoke but he remained in demand as a speaker for Republican candidates, with the high point in 1876 at the National Republican Convention where he nominated James G. Blaine for president, giving his so-called "plumed knight" speech. He believed in the Gold Standard and was a strong advocate for racial equality. He dissented from with the GOP platforms on many issue, such as women's rights and the need to provide social welfare for all, à la Thomas Paine.

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One cannot but be impressed by the power and logic of Ingersoll's prose on reading, for instance, his Paine tribute and other excerpts of his speeches. Here is Ingersoll's creed:

While I am opposed to all orthodox creeds, I have a creed myself and my creed is this. Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so. This creed is somewhat short, but it is long enough for this life. Strong enough for this world. If there is another world, when we get there we can make another creed.

Biographer Susan Jacoby accounts for his great popularity based on a number of factors. Ingersoll had a cheerful, down-to-earth manner. He had a way of explaining science, for instance, which was understandable to all, and yet did not oversimplify. His delivery was both logical and bitterly witty. He avoided hyperbole unlike many orators of this period.

While he, obviously, could not make headway with dedicated Bible fundamentalists, Ingersoll often found common ground with liberal Church people and with such luminaries on the Left as Eugene Debs, Robert LaFollette, and Clarence Darrow. He was asked to be a member of the defense team for the Haymarket anarchists in 1886-7, but refused because he thought that his agnosticism would hurt their case and he suggested a lawyer with strong mainstream religious credentials.

Besides his high regard for Paine, Ingersoll was a passionate and long-time champion of Shakespeare and Walt Whitman.

Some of the issues most vital to Ingersoll and his fellow humanist freethinkers included: separation of Church and State; America is not a Christian country; full equality of legal and economic rights for women including access to birth control measures, as well as the right to vote; ending domestic violence against women and children; free speech and artistic expression; opposition to capital punishment, and ending inhumane conditions in prisons and asylums; expansion of public education. In neither the Jacoby nor the Plummer works referenced in the end note was found any Ingersoll reference to war and foreign policy. In contrast, at this time, Mark Twain, an admirer of Ingersoll, was chair of an anti-imperialism organization.

Ingersoll's Great Legacy in Brief

In 1902, C. P. Farrel, Ingersoll's brother-in-law, published, under the imprint of the Dresden Publishing Co., *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, in twelve volumes, based on the lectures he wrote and gave during his long and successful career as an orator. At the website, infidel.org, its historical library lists for Ingersoll 153 titles, most of which are the titles of his lectures!

¹ This article depends on Susan Jacoby's biography, *The Great Agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll*, 2013, New Haven: Yale University Press, and her *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, 2004, New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Co., and on Martin A. Plummer's article on Ingersoll in *American National Biography*, 1999, New York: Oxford University Press. Most of the intellectual history related to Ingersoll and his times comes from Jacoby's works and some key biographical material comes from Plummer.