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Biographical Sketch of Hon. John Peter
Altgeld



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF
HON. JOHN PETER ALTGELD
TWENTIETH GOVERNOR OF ILLINOIS
BY
EDWARD OSGOOD BROWN
READ BEFORE
THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DECEMBER 5, 1905

ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENTATION
TO THE SOCIETY OF GOVERNOR ALTGELD'S PORTRAIT
THE GIFT OF
JOSEPH S. MARTIN
OF CHICAGO





Geo. W. Allen
1877
G. W. H. Allen, N. Y.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JOHN PETER ALTGELD,

As a member of the Chicago Historical Society I wish to express the gratitude which, in common I doubt not with all the members of the Society, I feel to those who have generously made it the trustee and custodian of the portraits which are for the first time exhibited here to-night. It was a wise and public-spirited act as I believe. In the constant changes of our political and social organizations, societies like ours represent that which is in the truest and most praiseworthy sense conservative. Removed from the temporary agitations and passions of the day, not because its members are indifferent to them, but because here their diverse opinions and tendencies are forgotten in their common interest in a special work which does not involve them, the Historical Society is an appropriate place for memorials of those men about whom have centered the clashing interests of their contemporaries, and who praised and blamed, loved, feared and hated as those interests may have dictated, have passed away with but one agreed and universal opinion concerning them, the undeniable truth that they have been great factors in the shaping and development of the social organism in which they lived. Here the materials will be found by which in the cold, clear light of history the final verdict of those who come after us, forgetful of our petty individual quarrels and selfish interests, and mindful alone of great streams of tendencies and beliefs, will be formed concerning their work and character. Here too should be, if possible, for those who will form that verdict, the opportunity to search out in the artist's presentation of face and figure the relation of physical to moral and intellectual character in the subject of their study.

Such an opportunity, beyond that given in almost any other case I have ever known, will be afforded to one who stands in after time before this wonderful portrait of John Peter Altgeld, the twentieth Governor of Illinois. This I say in appreciation of the genius of the artist who painted it, Mr. Ralph Clarkson of Chicago. No friend of Governor Altgeld who knew him well can see it, unmoved by admira-

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tion, not alone for the technical skill which the portrait shows, but for that infinitely higher, nobler and rarer thing, that ability, not to be described nor taught, by which the true artist in portraiture is known, to suggest and bring upon the canvas the heart and mind and very soul which speaks in life through eye and lip.

Knowing as I do the devoted friendship and affection which he who has given this picture to this society had for Governor Altgeld; knowing, too, as I do from my own inmost feeling, how one who loved Altgeld must feel towards this presentment of his very living self—I must with fervor and sincerity express our appreciation of the sacrifice to public spirit and to true loyalty to the memory of his friend which the donor must have made in parting with his individual possession of it even to trust it to our careful guardianship.

I am here to say but a very few words concerning the subject of this picture. Mine is not the duty to-night to discuss those acts of his public life, which have been most criticized and most commended, most blamed and most praised, according to the beliefs and the environments of those who were considering them.

This has been sometimes in the past my duty as I conceived it—my privilege as I always believed it to be. But it is not my task in this presence and at this time. It is better so, for we tread in these matters on the ashes of but lately burning fires.

It is to the tribunal of the future that as to these things Governor Altgeld's friends and opponents must, whether they would or not, submit their difference. For us who believed in him and the causes for which he stood most strongly it is a confident appeal we make, and we can afford to wait.

“For Humanity sweeps onward: Where to-day the martyr
stands,
On the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his
hands;
Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling fag-
gots burn,
While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe re-
turn,
To glean up the scattered ashes into History's golden urn.”

To-night I would call your attention only to a few personal traits of Governor Altgeld, which all must admire, to a few salient achievements of his life which show his self-reliance, his courage and his indomitable will, and to one or two of the matters removed from all controversy which must make his administration memorable in the history of Illinois.

John Peter Altgeld was born in Germany in 1847. He was brought to this country as an infant by his emigrant parents, who settled near Mansfield, Ohio. His father and mother were poor and perhaps of narrow views in regard to the training of their children. He wished for a liberal education. Conscious of intellectual power even as a young boy, he wanted to make the best of himself God had made possible. His schooling was very scanty. Like Lincoln, as a youth, he read few books but good ones. Like him, too, he read them in the midst of discouragement and hardships. In 1863 at the age of sixteen he became a private soldier in the Union army. Returning to his father's farm at the close of the war, he remained at work for his parents until he came to be twenty-one. Then with only a very few dollars borrowed from a friend he started west to seek his fortune. He worked as a common laborer for a time, I remember that he told me once, in building a railroad in Arkansas. I suppose it could not have been for long, for the latter part of 1869 found him a school teacher in a country school in Savannah, Missouri, and a law student in the office of a local lawyer at such times as he could snatch from his necessary work for a livelihood. In 1872 he was admitted to the bar, and almost immediately his ability gaining recognition, was made city attorney of Savannah. In 1874 he was elected State's attorney of the county of which Savannah was the county seat. But the duties which met him in that office were not to his taste. He served a year and then resigned and came to Chicago with the scanty savings of his three years' practice to hew out his fortune and make his name among the citizens of Illinois.

I well remember my first meeting him. Comparatively recent incomers to Chicago, my partner and myself had taken modest offices in the newly constructed Reaper Block at the corner of Clark and Washington streets. An office opposite in the hall was for a long time vacant, when one morning a young man appeared to ask us for the loan of

some trifling object and told us that he was a lawyer, that he had taken the room described and that he intended to partition off a small part of it for a sleeping room and thus live as well as do business in his office. He was not, as such things are superficially considered, an attractive or graceful personality, and yet there was something about him that instantly arrested our attention and that invited our respect and friendship. It was only a little while thereafter that he commanded our admiration as well. We soon found it to our advantage to associate him with us in some litigation of importance that came to us, and I was closely and intimately his friend as he was building up slowly and laboriously the practice which he finally left when he went upon the bench in 1886.

I will give you an illustration of the kind of man he was in that self-development and education which made him at the last a master of concise, nervous, eloquent English and a most effective public speaker. Talking with me one day in his office about the slow progress he was making in the drafting of some papers, he said, "I have to look at the dictionary for one word in every five to know that I have spelled it right." "Oh, take the chances," I replied. "That will do for you," he said, "not for me. I have to get while I do my work those means of doing it accurately which you were fortunate enough to get in preparation for it." Thus in those days, while he did not know how to spell accurately, he never spelled inaccurately, for at the cost of whatever time and drudgery was necessary *he always looked* until the accurate construction of the word had fastened itself in his mind, never to be lost.

In his little book on Oratory, in an incidental way, he shows how this idea of thoroughness had permeated all his thinking.

He says, "But let no man suppose that a speech should be simply an elegant or nice affair. Dilletanteism excites contempt. The idea I wish to inculcate in the minds of the young is that they must acquire elegance of diction and nicety and accuracy of expression; they must cultivate the voice until they have a perfect command of it; they must accustom the mind to orderly and logical arrangement, and when they wish to discuss a subject get all the facts, not only into the mind, but into the very blood, then pour the whole soul into it, and they will approach oratory."

As time went on I found more and more John Altgeld

to be that which has never been better described than by F. F. Browne, the editor of the Chicago Dial, in a foreign Review :

“A pale, intellectual, thoughtful man with a sad and serious face, a temperament reflective and philosophical, yet alert and ready, calm, intrepid and inflexible, able to stand alone against a thousand, yet quick to see the essential or potential elements in a situation and master in shaping them to desired ends ; a man impatient at obstacles and objections ; yet one to whom ultimate purposes and principles are more than present gains, and who knows how to bide his time ; of unyielding courage and endurance, yet no voluntary martyr ; able equally to bear attacks in silence or to give back blow for blow ; a friend of humanity and a hater of injustice to others as to himself.”

His life was laborious always, it was hard and narrow as well until the kindness and encouragement shown him by the late Mr. Goudy and Judge Shepard and others who I may not mention without their permission because they are living—to all of whom he never failed to express and to show his deep gratitude—placed his fortunes at a higher point than unaided he could as soon have struggled to. Even then and after his marriage the ill health of his wife and of himself might well have daunted a less determined and unconquerable will. Once with his wife ill in an adjoining room, he, stretched helpless on his bed in another, with difficulty securing even the attendance necessary for the most ordinary household duties, alternating between a burning fever and wretched chills, sent for me and insisted that I should bring for our joint consideration the brief of our antagonists in a pending lawsuit in which our reply was shortly due. Nothing appalled him, nothing turned him back, and yet he was nearly always a reserved, quiet, self-contained and self-controlled man. Injustice to himself as to others did stir him sometimes to impassioned speech. I remember well a rebuke and indeed a punishment inflicted upon him for quick resentment in a court room to a personal attack on him made by counsel opposing him in a lawsuit in which he was personally interested. He was at the time himself upon the bench. More loyal than the Prince, more papal than the Pope, some of his friends called on him—and I among them—to express their displeasure at the discipline inflicted on him by his brother Judge.

“Nonsense,” he answered, “it was exactly right. I was

angry, acted foolishly and was treated according to the Judge's duty and my own deserts."

I mention this that you may see that, long mindful of injuries and injustice as he might be, his was not the blind vindictiveness which his foes ascribed to him.

His self-reliance was superb. Once in a time of personal discouragement a friend of mine went to him and asked his advice as to whom he should turn for comfort and counsel. His answer was characteristic and it was a favorite idea of his I have often heard him express.

"Ask no man! Go out into the night and look straight up to the stars. Take comfort and counsel of them."

But those who knew and loved him best, who were close to his inner life and heart, know that composed, silent, seemingly indifferent to criticism and clamor as in public life he was, no man ever lived kinder, gentler, more humane in his feelings for the unfortunate and the weak, no man more affectionate as a friend, or in his family relations. It was said over his grave with truth that when bitter reproaches were heaped on him they did not fall on deaf ears or an unanswering soul, but that they bore no terrors with them like those of the condemnation of his own conscience, that he loved his friends, but could bid them one by one good-bye when they failed to follow where that conscience led.)

Of his public life I have said that I shall say but little here to-night. He left the bench to become Governor of this great State of Illinois. The enthusiasm that he felt for its magnificent resources and its boundless opportunities I could not well describe if I would. Many times have I seen his usual composure and his calm diction give way to enthusiasm and impassioned utterance as he dwelt on them. He loved Chicago and he loved Illinois even more. I was brought into frequent official contact with him while I was the legal adviser of the Lincoln Park Commissioners, during his administration. Whatever ignorant or prejudiced criticism may have said, I can bear witness from the most intimate personal knowledge that the great pleasure grounds of the people were the subject of his constant and watchful care with an eye single to the greatest benefit to be obtained from them for the greatest number of people. That the Lake Shore, which had been largely lost to the public south of the Chicago River, should be preserved north of the River to the northern limit of Lake View as the basis of suitable

recreation grounds to be built on the submerged shallows of Lake Michigan, for the use of the countless multitudes who are to follow us, was one of the projects closest to his heart. Those pleasure grounds have been assured for the future, and they will be an enduring monument of Governor Altgeld's administration which he would most appreciate.

But there is another already in existence, which Governor Altgeld to his great satisfaction lived to see already far advanced. I mean the University of Illinois at Champaign. I speak not only from my own knowledge of his constant and enthusiastic interest in its development, but also from that of those who, knowing but little of it at the time, have come to be in charge of its affairs to-day. "Governor Altgeld raised this institution," said President James to me not long ago, "from a comparatively insignificant country college to the rank of a great school of learning, the foundations of which are broad and deep." I feel sure that those of you who have of late years visited the University of Illinois will agree with me that the work that it is now doing and will continue, let us hope, for all the future history of the State to do, is of incalculable importance to the present and future well being and dignity of our great commonwealth.

Let no one draw from Governor Altgeld's words or deeds, be it too enthusiastic friend or hostile critic, that he misjudged or failed to appreciate the training for youth, either in the liberal arts or in technical skill, which he lacked in his own young days and so sorely missed.

He made it up for himself by his inherent ability, his indomitable will and his persistent, unremitting industry, but never for a moment did he waver in his belief that in the high ideals which a true and broad education inculcates among the young men who properly appreciate its dignity and importance, lies the true hope of democracy and of the Republic.

I ask your attention now to two quotations from Governor Altgeld's own words, one in an address that he made to the students of the University he loved, and one which are his last words, on the day he fell pleading for the oppressed and the defeated on the platform at Joliet, and which are inscribed on this portrait now exhibited to you. They better than any words his friends can use show to you the man.

The first is this:

"Young men, life is before you. Two voices are calling you—one coming from the swamps of selfishness and force, where success means death; and the other from the hilltops of justice and progress, where even failure brings glory. Two lights are seen in your horizon, one the fast fading marsh light of power, and the other the slowly rising sun of human brotherhood. Two ways lie open for you, one leading to an ever lower and lower plain, where are heard the cries of despair and the curses of the poor, where manhood shrivels and possession rots down the possessor; and the other leading off to the highlands of the morning, where are heard the glad shouts of humanity and where honest effort is rewarded with immortality."

And the other is this:

"I am not discouraged. Things will right themselves. The pendulum swings one way and then another. But the steady pull of gravitation is towards the center of the earth. Any structure must be plumb if it is to endure, or the building will fall. So it is with nations. Wrong may seem to triumph. Right may seem to be defeated. But the gravitation of eternal justice is toward the Throne of God. Any political institution which is to endure must be plumb with that line of justice."

