

Eulogy of Hon. Stephen Arnold Douglas, one of the Regents of the Smithsonian Institution / prepared at the request of the Board by Hon. Samuel S. Cox ... ; May, 1862.

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EULOGY

OF

HON. STEPHEN ARNOLD DOUGLAS,

ONE OF THE REGENTS OF THE

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

PREPARED AT THE REQUEST OF THE BOARD

BY

HON. SAMUEL S. COX,

OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

MAY, 1862.

WASHINGTON:
PUBLISHED BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

1862.

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EXTRACT FROM THE PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

AT a meeting of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, held May 1, 1862, Professor Henry, the Secretary, having announced the death of Judge Douglas, one of the Regents, the following resolutions were offered by Hon. Lyman Trumbull, and unanimously adopted.

Resolved, That in the death of the Hon. STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS, the Smithsonian Institution has been deprived of a most zealous friend; the Board of Regents of an active and attentive member; and the country of a distinguished and influential citizen.

Resolved, That the Board of Regents deeply sympathize with the bereaved relatives of the deceased, and that a copy of these resolutions be transmitted to them.

Resolved, That Hon. S. S. Cox be requested to prepare a suitable notice of the Hon. S. A. Douglas, to be inserted in the journal of the Board of Regents.

E U L O G Y.

IN February, 1854, STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS, of Illinois, while a Senator from that State, was appointed one of the Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, and continued a member of the Board until the time of his death, on the morning of the 3d of June, 1861. From the pursuits of his life and the peculiarities of his course, it might be thought that he was not well qualified to discharge properly the duty of a trustee of a fund intended for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men. But this would be a mistake, for, although he had given no special attention to any branch of science, yet his mind was of that comprehensive cast which enabled him duly to appreciate the nature of the bequest, and the general principles of the different plans which had been proposed for carrying it into execution. It is true, as I am informed, that before he was elected a Regent—he had adopted the popular idea—that the bequest was intended merely to diffuse useful knowledge among the people of the United States, yet when he came to study the precise words of the will of the founder,

and caught, as he immediately did, the peculiar idea of the object intended, namely, the extension of the bounds of science, and not merely the teaching of what is already known, he fully adopted the views on which the present organization of the Institution is based, and ever after continued a warm advocate and an able supporter of the measures now in successful operation for the realization of the liberal and enlightened intention of James Smithson.

In accordance with the usage heretofore observed in similar cases, a resolution having been adopted directing the preparation for the proceedings of the Board of Regents, of a sketch of the characteristics and incidents of his life, and the duty of furnishing this having been assigned to me, I address myself to the task with an earnestness that is only tempered by my fear that I have not sufficient time or sufficient ability to do full justice to the memory of one whom I admired as a public man, and sincerely loved as a friend.

It is, indeed, pre-eminently fitting that the name of DOUGLAS, so fondly cherished by the nation, and so familiarly spoken wherever American statesmanship is known, should be honored in the journals of this Institution, for whose prosperity he evinced so earnest a desire. It was not merely as one of its Regents that he showed himself the true and enlightened friend of objects kindred to those of this establishment. He ever advocated measures which served to

advance knowledge and promote the progress of humanity. The encouragement of the fine arts, the rewarding of discoverers and inventors, the organization of exploring expeditions, as well as the general diffusion of education—were all objects of his special regard—whether in the councils of his State, or in the hall of the Senate of the Union.

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS was born at Brandon, in Vermont, on the 23d of April, 1813. Like many, perhaps I should say like most, of the rural neighborhoods of New England, Brandon contained a highly intelligent and energetic population, independent alike in thought, speech, and the conduct of their public affairs; and doubtless the fact of his early years having been passed under the influence of the daily life and conversation of such neighbors, had some share in imbuing the boy with the sturdy independence and resolute energy which the man was so remarkably and so triumphantly to exhibit throughout his at once brilliant and laborious career.

His ancestors were of Puritan descent; and his father was a physician of both ability and reputation, but died at a prematurely early age, leaving his widow in very straitened circumstances, if not even in actual distress. It may, indeed, be only too reasonably feared that the latter was the case, for, excellent mother as she was known to be, she yet was unable to give young Stephen the full education he so much desired and so well deserved. He attended the district school

during only one-third of the year; during all except the four winter months he was engaged in the hard labor of a farm or in the shop of a cabinet-maker. In this alternation of manual labor and imperfect and interrupted schooling, he continued till he was twenty years of age, when he migrated to Illinois, where he taught school for his support, while he resolutely studied law. In 1834 he was admitted to the bar, and we may judge of the character of his early efforts in the courts from the fact that in 1835, being then only twenty-two years of age, this young man, whose short life had been so largely taxed by adverse circumstances, was elected State Attorney. From that time he was continually in the public service. He was, in turn, State Attorney, Member of the Legislature, Secretary of State, Judge of the Supreme Court of Illinois, and Registrar of the Land Office; and subsequently he was a member of the lower house of Congress, and three times in succession he was elected by his adopted State to be United States Senator; and, as is well known, not long prior to his death he was the very popular though unsuccessful candidate for the highest executive office in the gift of the nation.

These are the prominent points in the career of Douglas, whose life, commencing in obscurity and continuing through nearly the half of its whole duration under the most adverse circumstances, ended in the full light of high position, and the full glow of popular favor. The principles which he advocated,

and to which he unwaveringly adhered, as well as the measures he proposed, have been the theme of both criticism and eulogy elsewhere, but the discussion of them here would be out of place, and in violation of a rule early adopted by the Board of Regents, that in the affairs of this Institution, partisan politics shall forever be unknown. The points, however, in his personal character which enabled him to obtain so important a position, and gave him so great an influence, not only over intimate friends and colleagues, but also over the public mind, may well claim our attention as a study no less important than interesting.

If continued success be the test of merit, then must all admit that Judge Douglas was no ordinary man. That success in a single effort which may be referred to a fortunate concurrence of circumstances over which the successful man had no control, is not the true criterion of talent, is a truth which must be readily admitted. But when the course of an individual is marked through a series of years by a continual advancement in the same direction, and especially when that advancement requires forecast, knowledge, perseverance, and energy, his success most assuredly is evidence of talent, if not of genius.

Courage, energy, and a working power, both mental and physical, which have rarely been surpassed, were the qualities which chiefly served him in his earlier years. The son of a poor widow, and compelled to spend in bodily labor the time which other

boys of his age pass in school, he would probably have remained a poor and obscure individual had it not been for the resolute WILL to elevate himself, and the courage, force of character, and determination to ACT in accordance with that will which characterized his whole life. But of itself alone, that seemingly inexhaustible power of labor which obtained for him the suggestive sobriquet of "the little giant," would have been insufficient to effect the great success which he actually achieved, had it not been directed and aided by other mental characteristics, which some even of the warmest admirers and eulogists of the *politician* Douglas, seem to me very insufficiently to appreciate.

In addition to the characteristics which I have already attributed to him, Judge Douglas was remarkable for his quick perception of the nature of events, and of the consequences which, with almost mathematical precision, he could predicate as to their results. He had, to a wonderful degree, the power of seizing on general principles, and of making them a part of his intellectual stores to be referred to in whatever particular case he might have to deal with; and his retentive memory enabled him on the instant to call up alike a general truth, and a host of particular facts in effective illustration of his premises.

These qualities might have been modified, but could not have been increased, or even strengthened, by classical training, nay, in becoming more refined and

fastidious, it is far from certain that his mind would not, at the same time, have become less robust, energetic, and bravely self-reliant.

We do not intend by this remark to throw doubt on the importance in general of that early mental discipline which is furnished by the training of the schools, but to present the suggestion that in particular cases of extraordinary native vigor of intellect, determined on a single line of action, the gifts of nature cannot be essentially improved by the moulding influence of ordinary early education. These cases are, however, the exceptions to be avoided in directing the minds of youth and not the examples of the rule to be generally followed.

Although Judge Douglas was no scholar in the pedantic signification of the term, yet his mind was duly cultivated in the study of the law, a branch of knowledge which, when pursued merely in its details and practised in its daily routine of office forms, may tend to obscure the perception of truth in frequent endeavors to make the worse appear the better cause, is yet in its proper study, through the expositions of Blackstone and the other systematic writers on English jurisprudence, one of the most liberalizing and enlarging pursuits to which the mind of youth or early manhood can be directed. The generalizations of this branch of knowledge were particularly fitted to improve the mind of young Douglas and to prepare him for his future career.

But even the intellectual qualities we have mentioned are insufficient alone to account for the distinctive character of the eminence he attained. With these he might have been the dexterous pleader, the sagacious judge, the acute politician, and yet have fallen very far short of that perfect empire which he held not only over the minds of the few but also over the hearts of the many. He had other qualities which may be cultured but which cannot be created.

The lively sympathy with friends and associates, the intelligent and appreciating glance, the frank and hearty tone, the kindly grasp of the hand, the prompt and obviously disinterested service, these give to him to whom they belong a despotism which we are perhaps too proud to own, but which we cannot if we would resist. In the mere personal presence of Stephen A. Douglas there was a singular fascination; when you had once experienced the magic of his influence you were bound to him forever, his spirit seemed to dare you to rebel, and what was commenced by admiration for his commanding ability, was consummated by his kind and genial manner. Bold, fierce, at once haughty in defiance and dexterous in fence, he necessarily commanded admiration. But to admire is little else than to wonder; we admire a brave and gifted enemy quite as much, and, if a little terror be mingled, we may admire him even more than our true but less brilliant friend. But in the case of Douglas, we loved while we admired.

And this is the true key to his general popularity. His intellect conquered but his heart secured the conquest. His innate and ineradicable kindness, and his genial manner conciliated all who fell within the influence of his power. His political and public life exhibited but the mere outward husk of the man within; it was when you looked upon the gentle amenities of his home life, upon his love and devotion to his wife, tenderness to his children, and respectful attention to his friends, that beneath that somewhat rough exterior you could discern the character it concealed.

It will not, I trust, be considered improper for me to refer to the fact that I was one among the many young men of the west who were honored by his confidence and bound to Judge Douglas by ties of enthusiastic friendship, and that therefore I speak from personal experience when I refer to the magic of his presence and the controlling influence of his character.

As I have already said, this is not the place or the occasion for entering into particulars as to his political opinions and acts, but, alike to his friends and his foes, I must say from the convictions of my head as well as the suggestions of my heart, that history will be false to her trust if she does not record the fact that Douglas was a true patriot as well as a sagacious statesman. If he was a partisan politician, he never wore his party uniform when his country was in danger. It was a striking illustration of his character in

this respect, that when the administration of our national affairs was committed to the hands of his political antagonists, he gave his hearty and generous support to the government at the moment it required his aid.

Some have lamented his death as untimely and unfortunate for his own fame, since it happened just at the moment when the politician was lost in the patriot, and when he had an opportunity to atone for past errors. But man does not change his nature so readily; Douglas was the same from the beginning to the end of his career, with views merely modified or enlarged by the expanding horizon which opened upon him from year to year, in his increasing elevation of thought and position. The words which escaped him in his last hour were the expressions of the real sentiments of his inner life.

Observant of the causes which have led to our present civil war he ever strove by adjustment to avoid their disastrous effects. "I know not," said he, "what our destiny may be, but I try to keep up with the spirit of the age, to keep in view the history of the country, to see what we have done, whither we are going, and with what velocity we are moving, in order to be prepared for those events which it is not in the power of man to thwart."

Placed at the head of the Territorial Committee of the Senate, it was under his direction that Territory after Territory and State after State were admitted into

the Union. The comprehensiveness of his views was exhibited in his great speech on the Clayton and Bulwer treaty, on the fourth of March, 1853, wherein he enforced a continental policy and refused to prescribe limits to the area over which the principles of our government might safely be extended.

His position on the Committee of Foreign Relations gave him a breadth of view in regard to our relations with other countries, which was enlarged by personal observation in foreign travel, and in special historic research. His knowledge on this subject was conscientiously applied in the way which he deemed best fitted to advance the commercial and financial interests of our whole country.

He died in the midst of the people of a district where he had been cherished and honored during the whole of his public life; in a city whose commercial and material improvement was the pride of his heart, and a type of his own character. The maturity of his growth, the fertility of his resources, and his sturdy energy, rendered his life a microcosm of the great section of our country with which he was so closely identified. We may toll the slow bell for his departed spirit, we may drape ourselves in the emblems of grief; but if his friends and admirers would truly honor his memory, they will endeavor, like him in his last days, to moderate the heat of party strife, enlarge their views of political science, and emulate his growth in moral character and clear-sighted patriotism.