

**Susan Jacoby. The great agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American freethought. Yale University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-300-13725-5**

I wonder how many present-day Americans have heard of Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), who in his heyday addressed vast audiences across the USA, at a time when, as Susan Jacoby points out in her new biography, lectures were both a form of mass entertainment and a vital source of information. Ingersoll was born in Dresden, upstate New York, to a Presbyterian background. He trained as a lawyer, via an apprenticeship to older attorneys, and not at law school, which at that time was accessible only to the wealthy. In this he resembled Lincoln, and in Britain Charles Bradlaugh, surprisingly not mentioned by Jacoby, but who invites comparison with Ingersoll. For both, the law was a training-ground for their public speaking. This was delivered in a style which has almost completely gone out of fashion,<sup>1</sup> a victim perhaps of today's brief soundbite, a lack of toleration for arguments delivered at great length. Both served for a time in the army, Ingersoll during the Civil War on the Unionist side. Bradlaugh sat in the House of Commons (in circumstances too well-known to be rehearsed here) as a Liberal: Ingersoll ran unsuccessfully for Congress as a Democrat in 1860 but later switched to the Republican party over the slavery issue. In his speeches Ingersoll linked the defence of slavery with religious fundamentalism. It may come as a surprise to readers familiar with the views of present-day Republican politicians to find many freethinking Republicans in Ingersoll's time, while 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholics were overwhelmingly Democrats because the Republicans rejected tax support for Catholic schools.

Ingersoll spent much of his time defending the US Constitution, and the Founding Fathers' wisdom in separating church from state: "they knew that to put God in the Constitution was to put man out. They knew that the recognition of a Deity would be seized upon by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying the liberty of thought." British freethinkers might well contrast the present position in the UK, where Anglican bishops sit in the House of Lords. Ingersoll countered attempts to put God into the US Constitution with the question: which God? The God of the Catholics? The God of the Presbyterians? (and so on): "What court...is to define this God, and who is to make known his will?" Ingersoll had some political influence, but because of his views he did not get very far in his own political ambitions: he knew that to reach high office (a state governorship for instance) politicians had to pretend (at least) that they believed in God.

Most states of the Union had laws which privileged this or that religious denomination, and they varied with regard to blasphemy, although such laws were seldom enforced. In 1887 Ingersoll defended the freethinker C.B. Reynolds, who had been charged with blasphemy in New Jersey under a law dating from the colonial era. Ingersoll argued that this old law violated the 1844 New Jersey constitution, which guaranteed freedom of speech and religion. The jury was not convinced, and found Reynolds guilty, but the judge let him off with a fine.

Other issues on which Ingersoll fought will strike a chord today: Darwin's theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Substantial extracts were published in the *Ethical record* 111 (4), May 2006 (lecture on Ingersoll by Robert Stovold)

evolution, which Ingersoll championed in the US, while opposing the extreme “Social Darwinists” who cared nothing for those left behind in the race of life; birth control and women’s rights, where again he was ahead of his time; the “Comstock laws“ on obscenity, and the death penalty, both of which he opposed.

Jacoby ends her book with a letter addressed to the “New” Atheists (the inverted commas are hers), reproaching them for overlooking Ingersoll in their roll of honour. One possible reason, she suggests, is that he was not an original thinker, nor a scientist, nor did he write philosophical treatises. But through his lectures Ingersoll reached thousands of ordinary Americans who would never have looked inside such books. It is also possible that the label “agnostic” puts off those atheists who regard agnostics as half-hearted atheists, yet Ingersoll himself made no distinction between the two.

The Humanist Library at Conway Hall holds the Dresden edition of Ingersoll’s lectures, as well as many individual works.

*Charles Rudd 10 October 2013*