

Notes on
Silhouettes of My Contemporaries

By Lyman Abbott

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Dr. Lyman Abbott and his Contemporaries

The death of Dr. Lyman Abbott, preacher, editor and educator, is an event of more than passing interest to a student of American Life. Quite apart from the interest which one may have in Dr. Abbott because of his human qualities, there is an interest in him because of the 19th century developments with which he was interested and which in turn indicated his own point of view. Happily he had just published a book under the very interesting title of *Silhouettes of my Contemporaries*, in which he had picked 19 men and women with whom he had come in contact during his lifetime, many of them personal friends, and who seemed to him to be significant of the main tendencies of the 19th century, and particularly of the generation which was particularly his own.

[Henry Ward Beecher, Prophet of the Love of God]

It is difficult to realize the condition in which the old Puritanism (New Theology and revivals) had left the churches of New England at the close of the 18th century. There were no missionary societies, home or foreign; no young men's or young women's Christian associations; no anti-slavery/temperance, or other reform societies. Yale college had only four professed Christians in its student body, and had two Tom Paine Societies.

Many causes have combined to overthrow the theological system which produced this moral and spiritual decadence. Chief among them, four

Puritan Divines leading without conscious cooperation a revolt against it. William Ellery Channing, who taught the essential goodness of man, and interpreted sin a curable disease; Charles G. Finney who taught that man was a free moral agent, and therefore ought to repent of his sins; Horace Bushnell, who applied the doctrine of development to religion, and taught that sin is not natural but unnatural; [and] Henry Ward Beecher who taught that God treats men, not collectively as a king treats a community, but individually as a Father treats his children.¹

Puritanism of the 18th century, a religion of law.

The new religion of freedom.

A young man once called to see me with the following account of his experience:

I was brought up to believe that the Bible is inspired and infallible in all its statements, that the world was made out of nothing in six days of 24 hours each; that God made a perfect man 6,000 years ago; that he fell; and that because of his fall, sin, misery and death have entered the world. In that faith, I joined the Church when I was a boy. I have since learned that the world was not made in six days, that man has lived on earth a great deal longer than six thousand years; that he was gradually developed out of a lower animal form, and that the only fall has been a fall upward. The Bible is gone; my faith is gone with it; and now I do not know whether there is a God in the universe or a soul in the body. (Page 81)

This interprets the overthrow of faith of thousands which characterized the latter half of the 19th century. It was a faith founded on a book and on a false interpretation of that book; and

¹ Lyman Abbott, *Silhouettes of my Contemporaries*, p. 213-214.

when science undermined the foundation, the superstructure fell.²

P. T. Barnum, Showman.³
Edwin Booth, Interpreter.
The Smiley Brothers, Lovers of Hospitality
John B. Gough, Apostle of Temperance.
Alice Freeman Palmer, Teacher.
John Fiske, Evolutionist.
Edward Everett Hale, An American About Ben Adhem⁴
John Greenleaf Whittier, Mystic.
General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, Educational Pioneer.
General William Booth, Home Missionary Pioneer.
Daniel Bliss, Foreign Missionary Pioneer.
Dwight Lyman Moody, Evangelist.
Henry Ward Beecher, Prophet of the Love of God.
Phillips Brooks, Prophet of the Spiritual Life.
Booker T. Washington, Statesman.
Rutherford B. Hayes, Peacemaker.
Abraham Lincoln, Labor Leader.
Theodore Roosevelt, Preacher of Righteousness
Jacob Abbott, Friend of Children.

Barnum, P. T.

A tramp applied [to him] for a job. Would do anything for a dollar a day. B. gave him breakfast, then told him to lay a brick on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street, another close by the Museum (Barnum), a third on the corner of Broadway and Vesey Street, and a fourth on the sidewalk in front of St. Paul's Church; then with a fifth brick in hand, to "take up a rapid march from one to the other making the circuit, exchanging your bricks at every point and say nothing to anyone." At the end of one hour the sidewalk was packed with curious people, ... and enough of them followed the brick-layer at the

² Lyman Abbott, *Silhouettes of my Contemporaries*, p. 81.

³ Earl Davis here lists the chapters—each a person or persons—of *Silhouettes of my Contemporaries*.

⁴ About Ben Adhem is a poem written by English critic and poet, Leigh Hunt in 1834. It concerns a pious Middle Eastern sheikh who finds the love of God to have blessed him.

end of each cycle into the museum, to more than
pay for the hire. (*Silhouettes of my
Contemporaries*, Lyman Abbott, pge. 7.)