F. H. Hodder’s “Stephen A. Douglas”

Editorial Introduction by James C. Malin

I. Introduction

THREE years ago when an article by the writer in memory of Frank Heywood Hodder appeared in The Kansas Historical Quarterly, the work of necessity was done in greater haste than would have been wished, and, as no bibliography of his historical writings had been compiled, one important item was overlooked. As the most significant phase of Hodder’s contribution as a historian centered on the career of the “Little Giant,” senator from Illinois, it is particularly important to have included in its proper sequence his first formal article on Stephen A. Douglas.²

In this article Douglas was identified with the railroad question as a major focus of his interest and it was pointed out that securing the land grant for the Illinois Central railroad would have established his claim to remembrance if he had done nothing more. Hodder credited Douglas with the compromise of 1850, pointing out that he was the author of three of the bills and that the bills which constituted the compromise finally passed singly after Clay’s attempt at combining them had failed. Organization of the Western territories was designated as the controlling interest in Douglas’ career, and the Kansas-Nebraska act was the outgrowth of long-standing attempts to organize the territory west of the Missouri river as “an indispensable necessity to the development of the country.” It was the hope of Douglas that it could be done without reviving the slavery question, but that unhappy issue was injected into the situation by others.

There are two points essential to Hodder’s later development of the Douglas theme that are not explicitly stated in this article of 1899, otherwise it contains the kernel of all the rest of his thirty-five years of work on that subject. He did not show how Douglas identified himself with the city of Chicago by making it not only his residence, but by investing in Chicago real estate, thereby tying his personal fortunes with the rise of that city as the commercial and

transportation center of the West. Secondly, Hodder had not yet shown how Douglas conceived the plan of making Chicago the eastern terminus of the Pacific railroad, how he was preparing the way for that great enterprise by his attempts after 1845 to organize the territory which later became known as Kansas and Nebraska, and how he was endeavoring, without alienating the South, to checkmate its sectional program for a Pacific railroad by a Southern route with a Southern city as its eastern terminus.

II. THE REVISED Hodder Reprint

Mr. Lecky advises students of history, in order to arrive at an impartial judgment of any great question, to place themselves by an effort of the imagination alternately upon each side of the controversy, to try to realize the point of view of the leaders upon each side, and finally to draw up on paper the strongest possible statement of the arguments of each. The adoption of this advice would revolutionize the reading and writing of history. Most people study history to support preconceived opinions in regard to particular men or particular parties. Their spirit is that of the German justice of the peace who settled a suit saying: "You owe the man money. He is my friend and you pay him right away. Nobody wants to hear the other side."

After the lapse of more than a century historians are for the first time treating our American revolution with some degree of impartiality. It is perhaps too early to expect them to extend the same degree of impartiality to the struggle that preceded and culminated in our great Civil War. Most of the books about it are the work of participants on one side or the other who seek to vindicate themselves. A few attempts have been made to set forth impartially the point of view of each side, but there is still little charity for the men of either side who sympathized in any degree with the other, for the Northern men with Southern principles or the Southern men with Northern principles. Both are summarily disposed of as selfishly seeking their own political advantage at the expense of their own sections.

Of the great leaders during the period preceding the Civil War, no one has fallen from such a height as Stephen A. Douglas. No reputation has suffered so total an eclipse as his. His name is naturally associated with that of his great opponent, Lincoln's fame, comparatively slight in his own day, has grown steadily brighter and brighter since his death, while Douglas' name, powerful during his
life, has dwindled almost to nothingness. "Stephen Arnold Douglas, with the accent on the Arnold," writes von Holst, the great German authority upon our history, and his judgment is accepted as final by a large number of American readers. Is it fair, is it just?—that is the question.

Let us first briefly review the principal events of Douglas' life. He was born in 1813 at Brandon, Rutland county, Vermont. The death of his father threw the boy upon his own resources. His early years were spent on a farm. At fifteen he was apprenticed to a cabinet-maker and worked two years at that trade. After this he spent four years in study in the old time academy, first in his native town and later at Canandaigua, N. Y., the latter part of this time reading law in a local office. According to accounts he was a brilliant student and early developed a talent for public speaking and political controversy. In the summer of 1833, when just past twenty, Douglas decided to seek his fortune in the West. A serious illness at Cleveland nearly exhausted his resources. Leaving Cleveland, he made his way to Jacksonville, Ill., where he arrived with thirty-seven cents in his pocket. Fortunately securing a three months' school at Winchester, sixteen miles distant, he was able to support himself until he could finish his preparation for the bar. Returning to Jacksonville in March, 1834, Douglas was admitted to the practice of law and opened an office, being then not quite twenty-one years of age.

Douglas certainly went up like a rocket, however, his reputation may have come down like a stick. Devoting himself to politics, he gained instant prominence as the champion of Jackson and his policy. In less than a year after his admission to the bar, he was elected to the legislature, and in 1837 he was appointed register of the land office at Springfield. Immediately thereafter Douglas was nominated for congress, though not yet of the required age. In the election that followed he was defeated in a vote of 36,000 by a majority of only fourteen, on account, it is claimed, of the illegal rejection of ballots because of mistakes in writing his name. In January, 1841, he was appointed secretary of state, and a month later was elected by the legislature a judge of the supreme court. In 1843 he was elected to congress, and was re-elected in 1844 and 1846. Before taking his seat for a third term in the house, Douglas was chosen United States senator by the legislature, was re-elected in 1853, and again in 1859. Thus from February, 1835, until his death in June of 1861, a period of over twenty-six years, Douglas was con-
stantly in public life. Eighteen of these years were spent in congress, four in the house and fourteen in the senate. During the same period Lincoln served three terms in the state legislature and one in congress.

The issue of internal improvements was an important one at the time that Douglas entered public life. In the West especially it amounted almost to a mania, and the advocacy of extravagant undertakings was an easy way to popular favor. The session of the state legislature of which Douglas was a member adopted an elaborate system of improvements which completely failed and hopelessly involved the state in debt. After the collapse of the system, attention was directed toward congress. From the time Douglas entered that body an attempt was made to secure a land grant to a private corporation in aid of the construction of the Illinois Central railroad. A bill for that purpose was introduced at every session and as often failed of passage. Douglas opposed it upon the ground that the land grant ought to be made directly to the state. Soon after his transfer to the senate, he introduced a bill for that purpose, and in spite of strong opposition secured its passage in 1830. Douglas afterward said: “If ever a man passed a bill, I did that one. I did the whole work and was devoted to it for two entire years.” This was the first railroad act that bore actual fruit, and it initiated the system of land grants for railroads that prevailed until the Pacific railway legislation of 1862. Under this act the state of Illinois incorporated the Illinois Central Railroad Company and transferred to it the lands ceded to the state in return for an annual payment of seven percent of the gross receipts of the company. This has ever since proved an important source of income to the state. The amount paid by the company during the last fiscal year (ending October 31, 1899), was $664,625 and in all the state has received over seventeen and a half million dollars. If Douglas had done nothing else, this act alone would entitle him to the grateful remembrance of the people of Illinois.

In foreign politics Douglas was aggressively American, or what in modern political phrase would be termed “jingo.” He warmly supported the annexation of Texas, the Mexican war, and the claim to all of Oregon, and at a later day defended attacks upon Cuba and aggressions in Central America. As early as 1848 a campaign caricature represented him as exclaiming, “Young America wants progress. I am for the annexation of Cuba, Canada, Mexico and Japan.” It is unfair to say, as the Whigs did then and Whig his-
torians do now, that territorial expansion was exclusively the result of a desire for extension of slavery. This was undoubtedly a prime motive, but other considerations moved large numbers of people. And even though we may not approve the mode and the motive of some of our territorial acquisitions, we must admit that our splendid territory and unprecedented national development are the result of the policy of which Douglas was the ardent supporter. We cannot accept the doctrine that evil may be done that good may come, but candor compels us to recognize the fact that good has come.

The acquisition of foreign territory precipitated the controversy over slavery. The first territory acquired by the United States was Louisiana. The status of slavery in that territory was settled in 1820 by the Missouri compromise. By the terms of the compromise, slavery was prohibited in all of Louisiana north of the parallel of 36° 30', except Missouri, and was permitted in Missouri and by implication in that part of the territory south of Missouri. The next acquisition of territory was Texas. In that case the slavery question was settled by an extension of the line of the Missouri compromise. The Mexican war resulted in another increase of territory, which again raised the question of slavery. Northern men generally desired to prohibit slavery in all of the newly acquired territory and attempted to do so by the Wilmot proviso. Southern men desired to allow slavery in all of the territory or at least to divide it by an extension of the Missouri line. The rapid settlement of California and its organization as a free state presented an obstacle to the adoption of the latter policy.

Douglas was chairman of the committee on territories almost from the time that he entered congress. In that position it became his duty to frame and report the bills for the organization of the new territory. He therefore introduced in the senate bills for the organization of Utah and New Mexico. These bills provided for the admission of California as a free state and for the organization of Utah and New Mexico without any provision as to slavery, leaving it to the people of each territory to admit or exclude it as they should see fit. Clay now proposed a comprehensive plan for adjusting all questions relating to slavery that were disturbing the peace of the union, by a series of measures. Douglas' bills were referred to his committee and by him reported with slight changes to the senate. These changes were subsequently struck out and the bills were passed in the exact form in which they were originally proposed. Douglas may therefore be properly regarded as the author of all that part of
the great compromise of 1850 that related to the organization of the new territory. It was based upon what he considered the great principle of allowing the people of a territory to regulate their own affairs in their own way. It had the additional advantage of quieting the country by removing the settlement of the slavery question from congress.

"The issues of all human action are uncertain. No man can undertake to predict positively that even virtue will meet with its full reward in this world; but this much may be said with entire certainty that he who succeeds in marrying his name to a great principle achieves a fame as imperishable as truth itself." With these words in eulogy of Douglas, Senator Hunter closed his speech upon the Kansas-Nebraska bill. What could more strikingly illustrate the fallibility of human judgment. The service which Douglas undoubtedly expected would win for him the highest prize in the gift of the people and a permanent place in the galaxy of American statesmen has cast the shadow that obscures his reputation. From the time that he entered congress, Douglas annually introduced bills for the organization of some part of the vast tract of territory between Missouri and the Rocky Mountains, which was then known as "the Indian country." The admission of California rendered the organization of this territory both more important and more difficult. It was more important because it was necessary to connect the new state with the remainder of the country; it was more difficult because in California the North gained an extra state. The South was at a loss for a slave state with which to restore the equilibrium. Slavery would not flourish upon the barren soil of Utah and New Mexico. The North would not permit the organization of a slave territory in that part of the Louisiana purchase consecrated to freedom by the compromise of 1820. The South would not permit the organization of a free territory there, as it would develop into a free state and still further increase the advantage of the North. Still the organization of this territory was an indispensable necessity to the development of the country.

Douglas sought to cut the Gordian knot by applying the principle of the compromise of 1850, which had apparently brought peace to a distracted people. The act for the organization of Kansas and Nebraska provided in the exact words of the Utah and New Mexico acts, that these territories should be admitted into the union as states, with or without slavery, as their constitutions at the time of their admission should prescribe. Thus Douglas hoped to organize
the territories and at the same time maintain the peace of the union by excluding the question of slavery from congress. It was an application of the principle that the people of every community have a right to govern themselves—the principle upon which the revolution was fought and won—the principle which Douglas now christened "popular sovereignty." The idea was not original with him, but he made it his own by his championship.

The adoption of the principle of popular sovereignty involved the repeal of the Missouri compromise and brought down a storm of reproach upon its author. Douglas said that he could ride from Boston to Chicago by the light of his burning effigy by night and in sight of his hanging effigy by day. For the first time in his life he was unable to pacify the mob that greeted him upon his return to Chicago. He was confronted by three principal charges: first, that he had wantonly destroyed the peace that the compromise of 1850 had brought; second, that the repeal of the Missouri compromise was a violation of a solemn compact between the sections and a gross breach of faith; and third, that his object was to secure the support of the South and by means of it win for himself the presidency. Douglas replied that the organization of the territories was a necessity and that the only means of effecting it was to refer the question of slavery to the people of the territories, that the Missouri compromise was subject to repeal like any other act of congress, and that the North had violated its letter by resisting the admission of Missouri in 1821 and had repudiated its spirit by refusing to extend the compromise line to the Pacific.

That Douglas expected his measure to win favor in the South is probable, but it was legitimate to create the issue, if he honestly believed it to be right. A man's motive is his secret and it is presumed to be innocent until proved to be guilty. There is not a particle of evidence to show that Douglas did not himself believe that the application of the principle of popular sovereignty to the territories was for the best interest of the country. It was entirely possible to believe that the experiment would succeed as it had apparently succeeded in 1850. Lincoln and Seward created the issue that "this government could not permanently endure half slave and half free," "that the United States must sooner or later become entirely a slave-holding or entirely a free-labor nation." This issue was not less likely than Douglas' to provoke sectional strife. It proved to be right and its authors are lauded as statesmen. Douglas proved to be wrong and is denounced as a demagogue.
In the heat of political controversy, each side charges the other with insincerity. A later generation finds that one was right and the other wrong, or more often that each was partly right and partly wrong, but that both were equally sincere. Hamilton and Jefferson furnish a good illustration. Each distrusted the other and each believed that the other’s influence threatened the very existence of the government. We now see that both were sincere, that in some respects both were mistaken, but that both contributed elements essential to the development of the republic. May not a later generation find that Lincoln and Douglas were at least equally sincere?

The parallel between Webster and Douglas is a striking one. Most men who profoundly influence their times are dominated by single ideas. The keynote of Webster’s career, from his reply to Hayne to his 7th of March speech, was devotion to the constitution and the union. When he supported the Fugitive Slave bill he supported a right that no one ever denied that the constitution guaranteed to the South. He was immediately denounced as a traitor to his section, charged with seeking by corrupt means to secure the presidency, and overwhelmed with abuse that embittered his life and still dims his memory. Only within a few years are historians beginning to see that his course was consistent with his record. Douglas’ career was controlled by faith in the right of the people to govern themselves and by devotion to the interests of the West. Both ideas determined his course in the Kansas-Nebraska controversy. If they bore evil fruit, they also bore good fruit. The West would not be what it is today, had he not opened it to settlement. The act that enabled the South to carry slavery into Kansas, enabled the North to save her to freedom. What the result of leaving California permanently severed from the union would have been cannot be told.

Douglas’ course, like Webster’s, was consistent with his record. Both men were behind the best thought of their day on the subject of slavery. In the pursuit of certain great purposes they neglected others. That they did so was unfortunate, but it does not condemn them to infamy. Political progress in this country has resulted from the efforts of a succession of statesmen, each striving for particular ends. Washington and Hamilton stood for the establishment of efficient government, Jefferson and Douglas stood for democracy and territorial development, Webster and Clay stood for the constitution and the preservation of the union, Lincoln and Seward stood for the restriction of slavery by every constitutional means. Let all receive credit for what they did or tried to do. Let us not disparage any.
The Kansas-Nebraska act was a turning point in the life of Douglas and in the history of the United States. It brought on the Kansas struggle; that issue enabled the Republican party to secure control of the government, and that event precipitated the war. The first stage of the Kansas conflict consisted of the struggle to secure control of the territorial government, the second stage was marked by the attempt to compel the adoption of a pro-slavery constitution. As soon as the administration tried to force upon Kansas a constitution to which the majority of her people were opposed, Douglas courageously revolted. Buchanan warned him that “no Democrat had ever opposed his party without being crushed,” but Douglas was undaunted. He had pledged his honor to allow the people of Kansas to regulate their domestic affairs in their own way and he kept his promise. His course secured the applause of the Republicans, but divided his own party, leaving him at the head of the Northern wing.

Douglas’ name was coupled with the presidency almost from the beginning of his political career. As early as 1848 he was recommended for that office by the Democracy of Illinois. In 1852 the contest lay between Cass, Buchanan, Marcy and Douglas. Cass, Buchanan and Marcy were “old war horses” and Douglas was put forward in opposition to them as the candidate of “Young America.” The convention, being unable to agree upon any of the prominent leaders of the party, nominated a “dark horse” in the person of General Pierce. In 1856 the contest narrowed down to Buchanan and Douglas. Buchanan was considered by the politicians the more available candidate as he had been absent from the country and was therefore not involved in the exciting controversies that had recently taken place. On the sixteenth ballot the vote stood 168 for Buchanan to 122 for Douglas. Buchanan having received a majority, Douglas patriotically withdrew in order to give him the necessary two-thirds vote and the nomination. The Illinois state campaign of 1858 was the prelude to the national campaign of 1860. Lincoln, nominated by the Republicans to contest Douglas’ re-election to the senate, challenged him to a series of joint debates. Douglas accepted the challenge with reluctance. He was himself the most conspicuous man in public life, while Lincoln was comparatively unknown. He had nothing to gain by meeting Lincoln and everything to lose, while Lincoln had everything to gain and nothing to lose. The contest was the most remarkable one of the kind that has ever taken place. Both sides claimed the victory. The logic of events has given it to Lincoln. Douglas won the immediate prize, while
two years later Lincoln secured the Republican nomination for the presidency as the result of his canvass.

Of Douglas' loyalty to the union there was never any question. During the presidential campaign he boldly told the people of the South that they had no right to secede. At Lincoln's inauguration he occupied a prominent place on the platform near the president. Immediately after the attack on Sumter he called on Lincoln and pledged his support of any measures necessary for the defense of the government. No appeal made in that great crisis was finer than the address he delivered a few days later before the legislature of Illinois.

Whenever our government is assailed, when hostile armies are marching under rude and odious banners against the government of our country, the shortest way to peace is the most stupendous and unanimous preparation for war. The greater the unanimity the less blood will be shed. The more prompt and energetic the movement and the more important it is in numbers, the shorter will be the struggle.

In his last public speech, made on the first of May in Chicago, Douglas said: "There are only two sides to this question. Every man must be for the United States or against it. There can be no neutrals in this war; only patriots and traitors."

Worn out by labor and disappointment of the campaign, Douglas sank rapidly under the attack of an acute disease and died on the third of June, 1861, when but little past his forty-eighth year. His last words framed a message to his absent sons. "Tell them," he said, "to obey the laws and to support the constitution of the United States." Everywhere in the North his death was regarded as a national calamity. Had he lived he might have kept his party from wavering in the crisis of the war.

All in all, Douglas must be accorded an important place in our history. In the controversies preceding the Civil War he played a larger part than any other statesman. That he was a politician cannot be denied. Every man who has gained prominence in American politics has done so by dint of able political management. The ideal state of society in which the office seeks the man rather than the man the office has never yet been realized. That he attained the highest rank of statesmanship cannot be claimed. He was too much given to shrewd management and sharp parliamentary practice. Winning in person and powerful in debate, he was the idol of friends and the terror of enemies. His ability has never been questioned, his honesty and patriotism have never been disproved. The history of today is
too much colored by the partisan invective of yesterday. The generation that has given to Abraham Lincoln, so little appreciated during his life, the full measure of praise that is so justly his due, has underrated the honesty, the ability and the patriotism of Stephen A. Douglas.