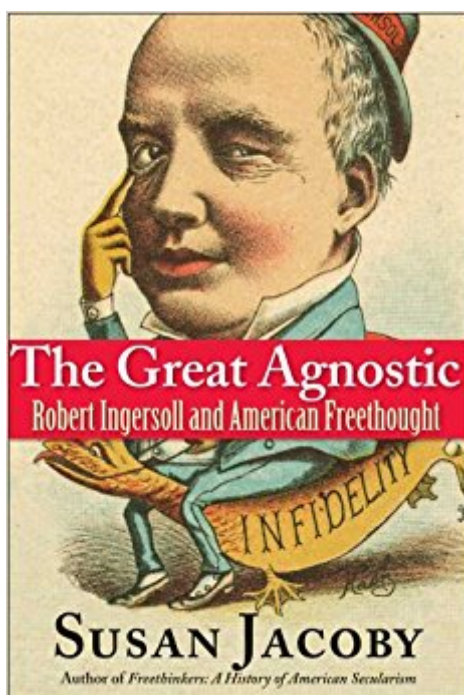


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# The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll And American Freethought



## Synopsis

During the Gilded Age, which saw the dawn of America's enduring culture wars, Robert Green Ingersoll was known as "the Great Agnostic." The nation's most famous orator, he raised his voice on behalf of Enlightenment reason, secularism, and the separation of church and state with a vigor unmatched since America's revolutionary generation. When he died in 1899, even his religious enemies acknowledged that he might have aspired to the U.S. presidency had he been willing to mask his opposition to religion. To the question that retains its controversial power today "was the United States founded as a Christian nation?" Ingersoll answered an emphatic no. In this provocative biography, Susan Jacoby, the author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, restores Ingersoll to his rightful place in an American intellectual tradition extending from Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine to the current generation of "new atheists." Jacoby illuminates the ways in which America's often-denigrated and forgotten secular history encompasses issues, ranging from women's rights to evolution, as potent and divisive today as they were in Ingersoll's time. Ingersoll emerges in this portrait as one of the indispensable public figures who keep an alternative version of history alive. He devoted his life to that greatest secular idea of all "liberty of conscience belonging to the religious and nonreligious alike.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A must-read book." — Bill Moyers, from "Bill Moyers, from Moyers & Co. interview (Bill Moyers Moyers & Co.)" Jacoby succeeds in capturing Ingersoll's remarkable appeal across sectarian and political boundaries. His warmth, humor, tolerance, and rhetorical skill are vividly conveyed, and they are

validated by much contemporaneous testimony from figures who would ordinarily have been expected to shun an infamous blasphemer. • "Frederick Crews, University of California, Berkeley (Frederick Crews) "As someone who did brave battle with narrow-minded fundamentalists in his own day, Robert Ingersoll would surely be appalled at the political influence of their heirs today. But their very rise makes Susan Jacoby's fine, compact and judicious account of Ingersoll's life and ideas all the more important. She has given us a splendid intellectual portrait of an American who deserves to be far better known. • "Adam Hochschild, author of *Bury the Chains* and *To End All Wars* (Adam Hochschild) "Robert Ingersoll used his wit to blast the absurdities of religion, while his warmth kept him close to his audiences. He has found his perfect biographer in Susan Jacoby, who uses his story to provide deep insights not only into Ingersoll's century but our own." • "Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* (Rebecca Newberger Goldstein) "Susan Jacoby has written a necessary, informative, and intelligent survey of the life, times, and writings of a most neglected figure in American history. A serious and thoughtful reflection on a topic of interest to historians, humanists, and social scientists, let alone general readers, *The Great Agnostic* will deepen one of the most important of contemporary debates. • "Alan Wolfe, author of *The Future of Liberalism* (Alan Wolfe) "Jacoby's goal of elucidating the life and work of Robert Ingersoll is admirably accomplished. She offers a host of well-chosen quotations from his work, and she deftly displays the effect he had on others. For instance: after a young Eugene V. Debs heard Ingersoll talk, Debs accompanied him to the train station and then "just so he could continue the conversation" bought himself a ticket and rode all the way from Terre Haute to Cincinnati. Readers today may well find Ingersoll's company equally entrancing. • "Jennifer Michael Hecht, *The New York Times Book Review* (Jennifer Michael Hecht *The New York Times Book Review*) "Jacoby writes with wit and vigor, affectionately resurrecting a man whose life and work are due for reconsideration. • "Kate Tuttle, *The Boston Globe* (Kate Tuttle *The Boston Globe*) "In this persuasive biography, Jacoby makes the case that Americans are dearly indebted to Ingersoll, and would be well-served to revisit his life and writings at a time when religious thought continues to be a divisive force in American civic life. . . . In this important volume, Jacoby illuminates a mind worth celebrating and the story of a life well lived. • "Mythili Rao, *The Daily Beast* (Mythili Rao *The Daily Beast*) Won Honorable Mention for the 2013 Southern California Book Festival, in the Biography/Autobiography category, sponsored by JM Northern Media LLC. (Southern California Book Festival JM Northern Media LLC 2013-10-22) Won Honorable Mention in the 2013 Great Midwest Book Festival for the Biography/Autobiography category, given by JM Northern Media LLC

(Great Midwest Book Festival JM Northern Media LLC 2013-11-04)

Susan Jacoby is the author of numerous books, including *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, *The Age of American Unreason*, *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History*, and *The Last Men on Top*, a recently published eBook. She lives in New York City.

Susan Jacoby sets out to -- and in her afterword advises "new" atheists to work tenaciously to -- restore Robert Ingersoll to his rightful place in American history. In two hundred pages, she makes a compelling case. Ingersoll was not only a champion of freethinkers, he widened the field for religious moderates and everyone who prefers a secular government and public sphere. And he lived an interesting life in interesting times. My only criticism of this story is that American freethought during the end of the 19th century seems very isolated. Jacoby has called this period the Golden Age of American freethought (in *Freethinkers* as well as here); it was also the golden age of British freethought, and the two traditions were in regular contact with each other. One example would be contraception, which Ingersoll advocated on the basis of women's right to control their own bodies. It wouldn't detract from Ingersoll at all to acknowledge that freethinkers advocating birth control had a long and important history on both sides of the Atlantic when Ingersoll took up the issue. Of course you can't do everything in 200 pages, but in her letter to the new atheists, the author calls out to readers of some contemporary British atheists such as Dawkins and Hitchens. Perhaps there would be less need to re-establish these ties across the water if we knew more about the ongoing transatlantic interactions between people like Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile, Frances Wright, R. D. Owens, Charles Knowlton, Charles Bradlaugh, Abner Kneeland, Gilbert Vale, and Robert Ingersoll throughout the 19th century. But that's my own pet project. Read the book! Rediscover Ingersoll!

An easy to read and engaging biography of this not well-known American hero of liberty, science, human rights, and irreligion. The story of his life is woven into the examination of his liberal progressive positions on social issue of his day, which seem to be many of the issue we are debating still. The short, concise book is a good introduction to Ingersoll if you know little of him and is also interesting to Ingersoll-philes by organizing the chapters thematically around the causes and issues he advocated. So, rather than a strictly chronological read, Jacoby dives, one by one, into the major topics of his many speeches, and interviews: Science, including Darwin's Theory of Evolution; separation of church and state; free speech, especially blasphemy; women's rights and equality; Humanism and Freethinking; and his criticism of the Bible, church, and preachers. The

value of a new, modern biography is that it can show us how relevant the work of its subject can still be to us today. With references to recent current events, people and debates, she illustrates how Ingersoll's words and arguments are still relevant. She closes with a chapter addressed to the so called 'new atheists' advising that they should be learning from Ingersoll and giving him credit for having advanced the conversation challenging religion over 120 years ago. Highly recommended. If you have never heard of Ingersoll, you will ask yourself, "Why haven't I ever heard of this man before?"

Jacoby introduces the subject of this book, Robert G. Ingersoll, as one of "the two most important champions of reason and secular government in American history---the other being Thomas Paine." Ingersoll (1833-1899) lived in an era when to criticize Christian orthodoxy was not deadly to one's life, but deadly to one's career. Paine lived in an earlier era, when to proclaim one's nonbelief was to risk one's freedom, if not one's life. Both men took great risks, and if the risks are slowly, but surely becoming less life-threatening, it is very much due to brave and clear-thinking men like these. Ingersoll is fascinating because of his broad appeal. He seemed to delight just about any audience---orthodox or secular. He did not preach to the choir. What so frustrated his antagonists was his ability to draw large and enthusiastic audiences in every part of the country. Equally frustrating to his enemies was the indestructible integrity of his personal and family life. It did not seem right that an admitted atheist should be living such a morally upright and happy existence. Yet, that was Ingersoll. Ingersoll defended the clear intentions of the founding fathers to keep God out of the U.S. Constitution. "They knew that the recognition of a deity would be seized upon by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying liberty of thought." He saw that the marvel of these framers was that they established "the first secular government that was ever founded in this world." Jacoby compares Ingersoll with "his hero Abraham Lincoln." Both became lawyers, not after studying at law school, but after working and learning with older attorneys in frontier law offices. Ingersoll was an intellectual pioneer in almost every area of human justice: racial equality, women's rights, and even animal rights. He spoke out forcefully against the horrible practice of vivisection. And his favorite poet was Walt Whitman, a writer who was often condemned as a sexual reprobate and libertine. Ingersoll condemned corporal punishment of any kind and of course capital punishment. Jacoby writes, "Ingersoll's argument against corporal punishment paralleled his opposition to both slavery and capital punishment: He insisted that all of these practices degraded those who imposed

them even more than they did the victims. If we wonder why we have not heard more about Ingersoll, the same might be said about Thomas Paine. Any objective study of the history of 18th century America must surely recognize the importance of Paine to the creation in America of a free, secular, democratic republic. Surely, he ranks with Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin. What kept him from recognition with those founders? What kept such a dynamic speaker and figure as Ingersoll from elective office? Jacoby concludes that it was his challenge to Christian orthodoxy that made him unelectable. And she sees this same prejudice operating today. Very few contemporary politicians have the nerve to state their lack of religious belief. Why should we be surprised at the level of hypocrisy among our elected officials? Jacoby has done well to bring this daring freethinker out of the shadows. And she rightly places him up there with Thomas Paine as a heroic voice in the evolution of our free, enlightened, secular democratic republic.

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