

The HUMOR



of IGNATIUS DONNELLY

MARTIN RIDGE

TODAY Ignatius Donnelly is remembered chiefly as an unsuccessful land speculator who lost a fortune in the ill-fated city of Nininger, as a golden-tongued orator, as a politician who could not or would not fit into any party, and as the author of books on such varied subjects as the lost continent of Atlantis and Francis Bacon as the secret author of William Shakespeare's plays. What seems to have been almost forgotten is one of the things that not only helped him put

his ideas across but endeared him to the people of the state — his sense of humor. Friend and foe alike agreed that Donnelly, more than any other Minnesotan, could make people laugh. Even men who considered his support of the Granger movement and the Farmer's Alliance to be dangerous heresies were willing to pay substantial sums to hear him lecture.

It would do Donnelly a great injustice, however, to simply label him a jester. He understood humor; it had far more than superficial meaning and significance for him; and he frequently lectured on the subject.¹ Aware of his fame as a humorist, town lyceums and other groups often invited him to lecture on "Wit and Humor." He enjoyed speaking on this subject in a formal and in-

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structive manner partly because it gave him a chance to exploit the wit of many countries and to please people of various backgrounds. After ransacking the literature of England in quest of material, he turned to the writings of the wittiest French, German, and Spanish authors.

He was particularly interested in collecting proverbs, which so succinctly express national self-consciousness, and he used them with skill to bring forth either a full belly laugh or a mere smile, as he desired. Among the proverbs he most frequently quoted was this observation from the French: "A glaring sunny morning, a woman who speaks Latin, and a child reared on Rhine wine never come to a good end." One of his Spanish favorites was: "A melon and a woman are hard to choose." He was especially fond of a German saying: "A bachelor a peacock, betrothed a lion, married an ass." These pithy expressions and scores like them became part of the everyday speech used by Donnelly.

Donnelly recognized two types of humor — personal and public. Rare was the occasion when he confused the two. In the circle of his intimate friends, he always sought the lighter side of a situation. Since he loved to laugh for laughter's sake alone, he could sit and listen to storytellers by the hour. If there was anything that he enjoyed more than listening to stories, it was telling them himself. He often said goodbye with a joke since dreary adieus annoyed him.

He always enjoyed stories that concerned him or were told at his own expense. For instance, he recalled that as a young man his father studied briefly for the priesthood in a small seminary in Pittsburgh which failed.

¹ Donnelly repeated his lecture on humor, first presented in 1871, in various forms over a period of more than a quarter of a century.

² Some of the stories illustrative of Donnelly's personal humor were told to the writer by his great-grandson, Mr. Philip Donnelly of St. Paul, who also made available the Donnelly family genealogy.

³ Donnelly to Ramsey, May 12, 1860, Ramsey Papers.

⁴ The clipping is opposite the entry for December 8, 1886, in volume 41 of the Donnelly Diaries.

"It was a day of small things," Donnelly would say with a twinkle in his blue eyes, "fortunately for me."²

Even in serious situations, Donnelly could not resist the temptation to use humor. An example is found in an official letter written to Governor Alexander Ramsey on the eve of the Civil War, when the chief executive was in Washington and Donnelly, as lieutenant governor, was acting executive. In closing, Donnelly casually told his chief: "I have drawn your entire salary in advance for a year and I am consequently flush with funds."³ Just how this final tidbit of wit was greeted by Bluff Aleck, whose sense of humor was hardly as broad as Donnelly's, may well be surmised. But for Donnelly, it was natural to break the strain of a sober and worrisome correspondence by resorting to teasing humor.

ALTHOUGH Donnelly's personal humor was of a casual and haphazard nature, his public wit was in no manner accidental; on the contrary, it was studied and developed, a tool that could be used for a purpose. Not that he failed to enjoy stories for their own sake, for he was a connoisseur of humor in the broadest sense of the word. Nevertheless, for Donnelly wit had to fit into an argument—it had to prove a point. He used humor both as a sword and shield in the struggle for political power and popularity. And so, to arm himself with the humor of his times, he studied thoroughly the devices used by the leading storytellers of his era. He read with care the writings of Mark Twain and Josh Billings, as well as those of scores of others, noting in his diary where he might profitably employ one of their jokes. For example, he doubtless had in mind the Irish Catholic voters of St. Paul when he clipped from a newspaper and pasted in his diary the following story.⁴ It tells of an "Irishman who took a Protestant friend into a cathedral. The latter, astounded at the richness of the altar decorations, exclaimed, 'That beats h—l.' 'That's just what it's intended for,' was Pat's quick rejoinder."

Donnelly told stories constantly to test them for audience appeal. If a joke proved unsuccessful, he discarded it; if audiences responded favorably, the story became a part of his permanent repertoire. Among the stories he never stopped repeating in different forms was that of the Irishman who climbed into a well and threatened to cut the rope and drown himself if his wife did not promise to treat him better. By middle age, Donnelly had completely mastered the technique of successful humor. True, he was rarely original, but there was never a time in his life when he stopped reworking his material to meet new situations. Thus he always managed to make his stories appear fresh and spontaneous.

Since Donnelly's jokes always had meaning, and his methods were varied, it is perhaps worth while to examine some of his devices. Most significant, perhaps, was his use of dialect stories. For a man born and reared in Philadelphia, he had a unique facility with Southern speech mannerisms, as used by both whites and Negroes. Almost every storyteller of Donnelly's day relied upon "Sambo" stories, but what is noteworthy in Donnelly is the fact that he used them without malice. From his early days in politics, when he came under the influence of Thaddeus Stevens, Donnelly was a good friend of the Negro. During much of his life he defended the cause of Negro rights, displaying a degree of tolerance unusual in the late nineteenth century. In his "Sambo" stories the Negro was not an object of prejudice — he was an individual with certain characteristics and experiences; consequently, Donnelly's jokes of this type could be appreciated and enjoyed by white and black alike.

Among these stories was one that concerned a Negro minister who was lecturing his flock on passages from Genesis. He seemed to have captured his congregation completely when, in a moment of supreme effort, he remarked that "the Lord had made Adam and put him up against a fence to dry." Suddenly, from the very last row of the

church, some one called out, "Reverend, where did that fence come from?" The minister, shocked for a moment, drew down his brows. "Two more questions like that," he replied, "could shake the whole field of modern theology."

Donnelly's Irish background doubtless was responsible for the fact that he found the Irishman in American humor especially attractive. "Pat and Mike" jokes were not unknown to him, although he seemed to prefer the simple "Paddy and his friend" type. Donnelly used Irish jokes in a manner that was perhaps unique. He did not merely tell stories with an Irish brogue. His stories reflected the naivete and simplicity of the Irish immigrant in America who did hard physical labor to earn a living.

For example, he fondly recounted the tale of Paddy, who after about six months in the United States wrote a letter to a friend back in Ireland. "Come to America," Paddy exclaimed, "it's a wonderful country! It's a land overflowing with milk and honey and opportunity." But, he added, "the present inhabitants are a foolish and spendthrift lot. Why, I was hired by a man for one dollar a day; and all I have to do is carry a load of bricks up a ladder, where this other fellow does all the mason work himself!"

Although Donnelly liked to laugh with the Irish, he was proud of his background, and bitterly hostile to American prejudice against his compatriots. When aroused he could readily turn his wit to the sharp side with such a quip as this: "Why is it, if an Irishman is hung for murder; his nativity is freely admitted; but if he does something worth while, it is suddenly discovered that he is Scotch-Irish?"

Like many second generation Irish Americans of his era, Donnelly harbored a vigorous dislike and distrust of the English. In the family genealogy, he even warned future Donnellys to beware of people in New York who, on learning via the Atlantic cable that it was raining in London, rolled up their pants.

Most of Donnelly's public humor was concerned with politics. An inveterate cam-

LECTURES
BY
Hon. Ignatius Donnelly,
OF MINNESOTA.

SUBJECTS—"Six Years in Washington," and "The American Humorists"

Synopsis of Six Years in Washington.

The Capital during the War. Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, Henry Winter Davis, Ulysses S. Grant, Charles Sumner, Andrew Johnson, J. Proctor Knott, Fernando Wood, "Sunset" Cox, Mullans, Garfield. The humors of Congress. The hotels. Washington society. Odd characters. Politics and politicians. The removal of the Capitol. An educational scheme.

Synopsis of The American Humorists.

Wit and humor. High rank in mental scale. Relations to mental power and health. Effect of climate and race. Comparison of English, Irish, Scotch, and American wit. Irish bulls. American wit with the beginning of the world's new literature. "John Phoenix," James Russell Lowell. "Petroleum V. Nasby," "Miles O'Reilly" Mark Twain, Bret Harte, John Hay, "Josh Billings," "Artemus Ward." Genius inexhaustible. The past a preparation for our future.

PART of a circular
distributed by Donnelly
in 1872

paigner, he made many major speeches in election years, and seldom did a canvass end without some humorous incident. A legendary instance is that associated with the particularly rough election campaign in 1866. In this first post-Civil War election, tempers were short and there was a tendency on the part of audiences to turn to acts of violence. Donnelly's campaign manager, Dr. Thomas Foster, one-time editor of the *St. Paul Daily Minnesotian*, warned him to stick to the issues and not try to be funny.

One afternoon Donnelly encountered a none-too-friendly crowd in Stillwater. Standing on a front porch, he was pleading his case when suddenly, from a wagon loaded high with cabbages, someone threw one of the vegetables at him. Donnelly dodged; the cabbage struck a porch post and fell harmlessly to the floor. Instead of reacting with anger or alarm to this belligerent display, he carefully picked up the cabbage, turned it over and over in his hands as if to examine it critically, and said to the crowd, "Some Democrat has sent up his card, in the shape of his head. It was not necessary for him to put his autograph upon it." The audience, which had been hostile, roared its approval. People in the crowd turned upon the cabbage-thrower and he fled the scene. The

⁵ *Stillwater Messenger*, quoted in the *St. Paul Pioneer*, October 19, 1866.

⁶ Published on April 29, 1868.

leading Democratic paper of Minnesota, the *St. Paul Pioneer*, furiously claimed that Donnelly had staged the entire affair simply to gain the upper hand, but the editor could not deny that the incident actually occurred.⁵

There was, however, a decidedly unpleasant aspect to some of Donnelly's wit. When goaded by circumstances or encouraged by an enthusiastic audience, he tended to become the most objectionable type of frontier exhibitionist stump-speaker, descending even to vulgarity. The truth of the matter seems to be that he was far too sarcastic for his own good, and his invective knew no limits. Small wonder then that he frequently talked himself into real trouble. On one such occasion he used some of the most disgraceful language ever heard in the United States House of Representatives.

The occasion was a sharp clash in 1868 between Donnelly and Congressman Elihu Washburne, who had openly criticized the former in a letter to the *St. Paul Press*.⁶ This was not only unfair and highly irregular, but it was also in very bad taste. Congressional courtesy required that such things never occur, especially if, as was the case with Washburne and Donnelly, both men belonged to the same party. No one doubted that Donnelly would react vigorously to this attack, and when it was learned that he planned to answer Washburne from the floor of the

House, the galleries as well as all the seats were filled.

Since Washburne was personally unpopular with his colleagues, Donnelly's characterization of him as a pedant, a spoilsman, and an ill-tempered petty politician met with applause. After speaking from prepared notes for almost an hour — the extent of the time allotted to him — Donnelly wanted to stop, but neither the galleries nor his associates would let him. As the speaker's gavel fell, there were shouts of "go on, go on." The members of the House voted unanimously to extend his time.

Then it was, speaking extemporaneously, that Donnelly passed beyond convention. With unprecedented rudeness, he declared that the hunger for public office was so great among members of the Washburne family that "every young male of the gentleman's family is born into the world with 'M. C.' [for member of Congress] franked across his broadest part." The speaker then observed that "The great calamity seems to be that God, in his infinite wisdom, did not make any of them broad enough for the letters 'U. S. S.' [for United States Senate]." ⁷

These crude remarks may have afforded amusement to a group of lumbermen and farmers in a frontier setting, but in the halls of Congress they had serious repercussions. One historian even contends that as a result of this speech the house was forced to withdraw one of its articles of impeachment against President Andrew Johnson. In it, the president was accused of using intemperate language.⁸ Donnelly learned a lesson, too, and he never again went to such extremes when castigating an opponent.

An outstanding demonstration of Donnelly's cleverness in politics occurred during the congressional campaign of 1866, when he was running on the Republican ticket from the second congressional district. His Democratic opponent was Colonel William Colvill. One of the latter's supporters, Daniel A. Robertson, fearing Donnelly's trick of pressing humor into the campaign as an ally, hired a public stenographer to follow him through

the early stages of the campaign and copy verbatim each joke Donnelly told. Equipped with this arsenal of wit, Robertson challenged Donnelly to a debate. Unaware of the scheme, but confident of his own superiority in debate, he readily accepted the challenge. Much to his amazement, Donnelly heard the challenger retell each story he had used in the campaign, including many he planned to use that very night!

Family legend recounts that Donnelly sat completely at ease, tilting his chair from time to time, looking over the audience or giving rapt attention to some unknowable object on the ceiling. When the time came for him to speak, his adversary waited eagerly to see if he had crushed Donnelly. Much to his chagrin, Robertson heard Donnelly explain to the audience what his opponent had done. But his embarrassment was total when Donnelly vowed he could tell these stories better and with deeper meaning than the first speaker. If he failed, Donnelly declared, he deserved to be defeated.

He then began his own speech. As he progressed, it became obvious to the crowd that Robertson had been a mere parrot. The audience would roar each time Donnelly approached a climax; already familiar with the point of the story, his listeners were captivated by the subtlety with which Donnelly led up to it. After each round of applause, the speaker would turn and bow slightly to his opponent, who now sat shamefacedly before the grinning crowd.⁹ Few men would have had the courage and skill to face such a situation, but Donnelly had few fears when it came to humor. Robertson was no match for Minnesota's greatest wit, who easily won a seat in Congress in the election that followed.

⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 session, 1868, p. 2349-2354.

⁸ Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *History of the United States since the Civil War*, 2:114 (New York, 1922).

⁹ *St. Paul Press*, November 4, 1866; Donnelly Diaries, volume 9, November 3, 1866.

THE CIRCULAR reproduced on page 239 is from an item dated March 4, 1872, in the Donnelly Papers.



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