

**ROBERT GREEN
INGERSOLL**



**THE GHOSTS,
AND OTHER
LECTURES**

Robert Green Ingersoll

The Ghosts, and Other Lectures

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Colin Finch

EAN 8596547243311

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022



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Introduction

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The Ghosts, and Other Lectures gathers a representative selection of Robert Green Ingersoll's public writings, arranged to display the breadth of his career as an orator, reformer, and critic of received opinion. The volume presents lectures, political speeches, commemorative addresses, tributes, and essayistic pieces, rather than fiction or drama. Its scope is not exhaustive; instead it offers essential texts that defined his public voice and the issues to which he returned. From preface to conclusion, the collection follows Ingersoll in the forum and on the platform, where he tested arguments before audiences and refined a style that combined clarity, wit, and moral urgency.

As the title signals, a keynote is "The Ghosts," Ingersoll's celebrated lecture challenging the authority of superstition and the persistence of fear in law, education, and social life. Without resorting to invective, he appeals to evidence, experience, and humane values, arguing that progress follows from free inquiry and the courage to revise inherited beliefs. The piece exemplifies his method: define the question, examine tradition, and invite the audience to imagine alternatives grounded in reason and sympathy. It also sets the tone for the collection, where skepticism is allied not to cynicism but to a constructive vision of human dignity.

Questions of freedom shape the sequence that follows. "The Liberty of Man, Woman and Child," together with the

focused addresses “Liberty of Woman” and “The Liberty of Children,” advances a comprehensive argument for personal rights, education, and equality before the law. Ingersoll’s rhetoric favors lucid definitions, balanced contrasts, and a cadence suited to public hearing. He presses for emancipation of conscience, for women’s civil and political equality, and for the protection and development of children as ends in themselves. The essays belong to the tradition of civic persuasion, blending ethical appeal, historical reference, and common-sense illustration rather than technical philosophy.

The political and patriotic texts show allied facets of the same temperament. “1776. The Declaration of Independence” offers an orator’s meditation on the principles asserted at the nation’s founding and their unfinished demands. The nominating oration for James G. Blaine, the “Speech at Cincinnati,” and the remarks collected as “The Grant Banquet at the Palmer House, Chicago, Thursday, Nov. 18th, 1879” demonstrate Ingersoll’s facility with party rhetoric, civic celebration, and historical commemoration. He praises, criticizes, and exhorts in equal measure, using narrative, analogy, and pointed definition to link ideals with responsibility. Throughout, liberty remains the touchstone, not a partisan slogan.

Two tributes frame the personal dimension of his eloquence. “A Tribute to the Rev. Alexander Clark” portrays a life of public service and kindness, extending respect across theological difference. “A Tribute to Ebon C. Ingersoll, by his brother Robert” registers private grief in public

cadences, honoring a beloved brother while reflecting on character, friendship, and duty. These memorial addresses show how Ingersoll's humanism is inseparable from gratitude and sympathy. The rhetorical energy that elsewhere confronts dogma here steadies sorrow and remembers virtues. In them, argument yields to portraiture, yet the same devotion to honesty and compassion continues to guide.

Other pieces widen the horizon of subject and audience. "About Farming in Illinois" addresses the realities of work, exchange, and law as they affect rural life, a reminder that reform must speak to everyday conditions. "The Past Rises Before Me Like a Dream" revisits national memory and the sacrifices of soldiers, drawing civic lessons without sanctimony. Across such varied occasions, the same stylistic signatures recur: a preference for plain terms, illustrative anecdotes, and rhythmic emphasis that carries a room. Ingersoll links practical concerns with general principles, insisting that progress be measured not only by argument but by well-being.

Taken together, these lectures and speeches illuminate the coherence of Ingersoll's outlook: the defense of free thought, the call for equal rights, the cultivation of civic courage, and the affirmation of secular ethics. The collection invites readers to hear nineteenth-century American oratory as literature and public philosophy, composed for immediate effect yet durable in argument. It underscores his belief that a republic depends on candor, education, and the separation of civil authority from religious control. By gathering his most characteristic pieces, this volume offers

both an introduction to his essential work and a resource for ongoing debates about liberty.

Historical Context

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Ingersoll's *The Ghosts, and Other Lectures* arose from the restless United States of the Reconstruction and early Gilded Age. Rapid industrialization, swelling immigration, and urban growth transformed public life, while the lyceum and commercial lecture circuits carried new ideas into packed halls from Boston to Chicago. A former Union colonel and Illinois attorney general (1867–69), Robert G. Ingersoll fused battlefield memory, courtroom cadence, and partisan experience into speeches on liberty, belief, and citizenship. Between the late 1860s and 1879 he toured relentlessly, publishing addresses that interrogated inherited authority and celebrated Enlightenment ideals amid fierce contests over religion, race, gender, and national identity.

Central to the collection is *The Ghosts*, a polemic against superstition that reflects a broader nineteenth-century clash between science and theology. Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), the spread of biblical "higher criticism," and popular science lectures—such as John Tyndall's widely reported Belfast Address (1874)—emboldened freethinkers while alarming clergy. In the United States, the 1873 Comstock Act censored "obscene" and heterodox materials, and publishers like D. M. Bennett faced prosecution by the late 1870s. Ingersoll's arguments for reason, secular education, and freedom of conscience resonated with the National Liberal League's campaigns, even as opponents mobilized revivalist energies to restrain blasphemy and irreligion.

His linked lectures on the liberty of man, woman, and child emerged amid contested reforms in family life and civic status. The women's suffrage movement, energized since Seneca Falls (1848), suffered judicial setback in *Minor v. Happersett* (1875), while Susan B. Anthony's 1873 trial dramatized voter exclusion under the new Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Married women's property laws expanded unevenly, debates over divorce sharpened, and coeducation spread in the Midwest. Simultaneously, child labor and schooling were flashpoints: Massachusetts had pioneered compulsory education in 1852; other states followed in the 1870s, alongside nascent child-protection societies. Ingersoll's rhetoric joined liberal currents demanding consent, autonomy, and secular instruction.

His celebration of 1776 and the Declaration of Independence drew power from the nation's centennial reflections in 1876. The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition showcased industrial prowess while orators debated whether the founding promise encompassed newly emancipated citizens. That same year Frederick Douglass, at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C., insisted the Revolution's ideals obliged equal rights in practice. After the disputed Hayes-Tilden election and the 1877 "Compromise," federal retreat from Reconstruction intensified these arguments. Ingersoll invoked Enlightenment natural-rights language to criticize sectarian privilege and to defend universal liberty, linking revolutionary memory to contemporary struggles over race, suffrage, and citizenship.

His national political profile crystallized in Cincinnati during the Republican National Convention of June 1876. There Ingersoll delivered the electrifying nominating address for James G. Blaine, hailing him as a “plumed knight” while dismissing the damaging Mulligan letters controversy. The convention ultimately turned to Rutherford B. Hayes, yet newspapers from the Cincinnati Commercial to the New York Tribune celebrated Ingersoll’s oratory. That prominence fed demand for his lectures, where he recast partisan themes—civil service reform, separation of church and state, and wartime loyalty—into broader meditations on liberty and progress. The collection preserves that crossover between campaign rhetoric and civic philosophy.

Commemoration of the Civil War framed several addresses. The newly prominent Grand Army of the Republic fostered Decoration Day rituals after 1868, and public remembrances flourished in the late 1870s. Ingersoll’s “The past rises before me like a dream” drew on his service with the Eleventh Illinois Cavalry and on a culture that sacralized sacrifice while debating reunion’s meaning. When Ulysses S. Grant returned from his world tour in 1879, Chicago staged a lavish banquet at the Palmer House on November 18; Ingersoll’s toast welded gratitude to Union victory with a civic boosterism emblematic of the metropolis’s Gilded Age confidence.

Questions of economic justice thread through About Farming in Illinois. Postwar farmers faced volatile commodity prices, high interest, and discriminatory freight rates. The Granger movement, organized as the Patrons of Husbandry (founded 1867), helped secure state railroad regulations in

the Upper Midwest, culminating in the Supreme Court's *Munn v. Illinois* (1877) decision upholding rate controls. The Panic of 1873 and deflation further radicalized rural politics, feeding Greenback and anti-monopoly campaigns. Speaking from a Midwestern perspective, Ingersoll framed prosperity as dependent on science, infrastructure, and fair law, a vision that complemented his broader defense of secular schools and rational, democratic governance.

Finally, the volume's elegiac tributes reveal how public mourning intersected with liberal theology's unraveling. The Reverend Alexander Clark, a prominent Methodist minister and editor in Pennsylvania, died in 1871, prompting Ingersoll to honor a Christian adversary with civility while insisting truth need not fear debate. More personal still, his 1879 funeral oration for his brother, former Illinois congressman Ebon C. Ingersoll, delivered in Washington, D.C., offered secular consolation—"life is a narrow vale"—that newspapers widely reprinted. Such performances showed an orator capable of reconciling tenderness with skepticism, and they softened, for many contemporaries, the sharper critiques embedded elsewhere in the collection.

Synopsis (Selection)

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Rationalism and Freethought: PREFACE.; THE GHOSTS.

The preface positions the collection as a forthright defense of reason, science, and secular morality against superstition and priestly power.

The Ghosts develops this stance through vivid, often satirical critiques of inherited fears and dogmas, showcasing Ingersoll's ringing oratory, humor, and moral urgency.

Liberty Lectures: THE LIBERTY OF MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD; LIBERTY OF WOMAN.; THE LIBERTY OF CHILDREN.; CONCLUSION.

This suite advances a humanist program for personal and civic freedom, arguing that law, education, and conscience should secure the autonomy and dignity of every individual.

Focused sections on women and children press for equality, secular schooling, and domestic justice, ending in a summative peroration that blends practical reform with moral fervor.

ABOUT FARMING IN ILLINOIS.

A wry, plainspoken critique of agricultural life exposes the gap between political platitudes and the economic realities facing Midwestern farmers.

Local detail broadens into commentary on labor, fairness, and common-sense reform, revealing Ingersoll's populist sympathies and comic edge.

Political Orations and National Memory: 1776. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.; SPEECH AT CINCINNATI; NOMINATING JAMES G. BLAINE FOR THE PRESIDENCY,; "THE PAST RISES BEFORE ME LIKE A DREAM."; THE GRANT BANQUET AT THE PALMER HOUSE, CHICAGO, THURSDAY, NOV. 18th, 1879.

These addresses fuse patriotic celebration with liberal principles, invoking revolutionary ideals, Union sacrifice, and civic duty to frame contemporary politics.

Whether endorsing a candidate or honoring soldiers and Grant, the tone is cadenced and emotive, using historical memory and rhetorical flourish to argue for national renewal and public virtue.

Tributes and Eulogies: A TRIBUTE TO THE Rev. ALEXANDER CLARK.; A TRIBUTE TO EBON C. INGERSOLL, BY HIS BROTHER ROBERT.

The memorial essays adopt an intimate, elegiac register to honor character, service, and humane influence beyond the grave.

They temper steadfast secularism with generosity toward the departed, highlighting themes of integrity, kindness, and the lasting moral example of a life well lived.

THE GHOSTS, AND OTHER LECTURES

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These lectures have been so maimed and mutilated by orthodox malice; have been made to appear so halt, crutched and decrepit by those who mistake the pleasures of calumny for the duties of religion, that in simple justice to myself I concluded to publish them.

Most of the clergy are, or seem to be, utterly incapable of discussing anything in a fair and catholic spirit. They appeal, not to reason, but to prejudice; not to facts, but to passages of scripture. They can conceive of no goodness, of no spiritual exaltation beyond the horizon of their creed. Whoever differs with them upon what they are pleased to call "fundamental truths" is, in their opinion, a base and infamous man. To re-enact the tragedies of the Sixteenth Century, they lack only the power. Bigotry in all ages has been the same. Christianity simply transferred the brutality of the Colosseum to the Inquisition. For the murderous combat of the gladiators, the saints substituted the *auto de fe*. What has been called religion is, after all, but the organization of the wild beast in man. The perfumed blossom of arrogance is Heaven. Hell is the consummation of revenge.

The chief business of the clergy has always been to destroy the joy of life[2q], and multiply and magnify the terrors and tortures of death and perdition. They have polluted the heart and paralyzed the brain; and upon the ignorant altars of the Past and the Dead, they have endeavored to sacrifice the Present and the Living.

Nothing can exceed the mendacity of the religious press[1q]. I have had some little experience with political editors, and am forced to say, that until I read the religious papers, I did not know what malicious and slimy falsehoods could be constructed from ordinary words. The ingenuity with which the real and apparent meaning can be tortured out of language, is simply amazing. The average religious editor is intolerant and insolent; he knows nothing of affairs; he has the envy of failure, the malice of impotence, and always accounts for the brave and generous actions of unbelievers, by low, base and unworthy motives.

By this time, even the clergy should know that the intellect of the Nineteenth Century needs no, guardian. They should cease to regard themselves as shepherds defending flocks of weak, silly and fearful sheep from the claws and teeth of ravening wolves. By this time they should know that the religion of the ignorant and brutal Past no longer satisfies the heart and brain; that the miracles have become contemptible; that the "evidences" have ceased to convince; that the spirit of investigation cannot be stopped nor stayed; that the Church is losing her power; that the young are holding in a kind of tender contempt the sacred follies of the old; that the pulpit and pews no longer represent the culture and morality of the world, and that the brand of intellectual inferiority is upon the orthodox brain.

Men should be liberated from the aristocracy of the air. Every chain of superstition should be broken. The rights of men and women should be equal and sacred—marriage should be a perfect partnership—children should be

governed by kindness,—every family should be a republic—every fireside a democracy.

It seems almost impossible for religious people to really grasp the idea of intellectual freedom. They seem to think that man is responsible for his honest thoughts; that unbelief is a crime; that investigation is sinful; that credulity is a virtue, and that reason is a dangerous guide. They cannot divest themselves of the idea that in the realm of thought there must be government—authority and obedience—laws and penalties—rewards and punishments, and that somewhere in the universe there is a penitentiary for the soul.

In the republic of mind, *one* is a majority[4q]. There, all are monarchs, and all are equals. The tyranny of a majority even is unknown. Each one is crowned, sceptered and throned. Upon every brow is the tiara, and around every form is the imperial purple. Only those are good citizens who express their honest thoughts, and those who persecute for opinion's sake, are the only traitors. There, nothing is considered infamous except an appeal to brute force, and nothing sacred but love, liberty, and joy. The church contemplates this republic with a sneer. From the teeth of hatred she draws back the lips of scorn. She is filled with the spite and spleen born of intellectual weakness. Once she was egotistic; now she is envious.

Once she wore upon her hollow breast false gems, supposing them to be real. They have been shown to be false, but she wears them still. She has the malice of the caught, the hatred of the exposed.

We are told to investigate the bible for ourselves, and at the same time informed that if we come to the conclusion that it is not the inspired word of God, we will most assuredly be damned. Under such circumstances, if we believe this, investigation is impossible. Whoever is held responsible for his conclusions cannot weigh the evidence with impartial scales. Fear stands at the balance, and gives to falsehood the weight of its trembling hand.

I oppose the Church because she is the enemy of liberty; because her dogmas are infamous and cruel; because she humiliates and degrades woman; because she teaches the doctrines of eternal torment and the natural depravity of man; because she insists upon the absurd, the impossible, and the senseless; because she resorts to falsehood and slander; because she is arrogant and revengeful; because she allows men to sin on a credit; because she discourages self-reliance, and laughs at good works; because she believes in vicarious virtue and vicarious vice—vicarious punishment and vicarious reward; because she regards repentance of more importance than restitution, and because she sacrifices the world we have to one we know not of.

The free and generous, the tender and affectionate, will understand me. Those who have escaped from the grated cells of a creed will appreciate my motives. The sad and suffering wives, the trembling and loving children will thank me: This is enough.

Robert G. Ingersoll.
Washington, D. C.,
April 13, 1878.