

CHARLES BALDWIN.

BY HON. ROBERT SLOAN.

Charles Baldwin was born in Guernsey County, Ohio, in 1818; came to Iowa in 1840; married in 1844; was a part of Keosauqua and Van Buren County for fifty-eight years. His name was not widely known, but he did a man's work and filled a man's place in the world. He, and such as he, caused civilization to take its full step upward in the last generation. Such as he are pushing civilization a shade higher in this generation; and such as they, a little bigger and better possibly than their fathers, will advance it another grade in their time; and so on, from generation to generation.

He was rather taller than the average man, very erect and dignified in his carriage. Few people slapped him on the back and called him by his first name; but some did, and very heartily. Rather shunning than courting recognition or popularity, his advice was asked and his judgment was influential in determining matters of important public concern. Without posing as the purest, he was pretty sure to be right on moral questions. His judgment on economic matters was sound. He attended church regularly with his religious wife, and his authority, rather more perhaps than her gentle admonition, took their children always to Sunday-school. He was a thoughtful, well-read, non-religious man, who year after year attended an orthodox church Sunday after Sunday, largely because he had a growing family and his wife wanted him to. With no college training himself, and always in moderate circumstances, he sent each of his children in turn to college; and the time never came when they could not get information from their self-educated father. When young, they went to the public school every day, rain or shine, no excuse being allowed but sickness, and genuine sickness at that. The mother might have been talked over when the rain

was heavy or the roads were icy, but the father never. He was his own children's disciplinarian, not only at home but on the street and at school. He felt responsible for their behavior everywhere.

Rather strict and austere with his own children, there never was a time when they did not know he would have gone to the stake for the least worthy of them. Like a good winter apple, he grew mellow with age, and his grandchildren ran over him much as they did their grandmother, and everybody ran over her. While his children stood a little in awe of him, they loved and respected him, and believed there was nothing too hard for him. To them he was a very encyclopedia of knowledge. Without any pretense to scholarship he was an omnivorous reader; and from choice, as well as because he was the head of the family and responsible for its intellectual as well as material advancement, he read good books, and stored his mind with useful knowledge, which became a mine of information.

He came to Iowa when it as well as he was young, and located in Keosauqua when that promised to be one of the leading cities of the State. It was then full of bright, ambitious young men, many of whom have since achieved state and national reputation.

He was married there in 1844 to Rachel Wright. She was a sister of Judge George G. Wright, called in life, "The Grand Old Man" of Iowa, and of Governor Joseph A. Wright, of Indiana, Senator from that state, and our Ambassador to Germany at the time of his death.

The family life was a devoted one. They lived long enough to celebrate their golden wedding in the old homestead, surrounded by children, grand-children and a multitude of friends. They were greatly esteemed in the community and much beloved, far and near, as "Uncle Charley" and "Aunt Rachel". They were gifted socially, and their home in Keosauqua was long an example of generous and cordial hospitality. He died January 28, 1898, and Mrs. Baldwin died April 15, 1902.

The writer's acquaintance with Mr. Baldwin began in 1860, when he was a member of the firm of Wright and Baldwin, attorneys-at-law, which association was formed upon the retirement of Judge Wright from the supreme bench in January. Upon the death of Judge Stockton, in the summer of that year, Judge Wright was invited to fill the vacancy and resumed his position as one of the Justices of the Supreme Court. Mr. Baldwin then formed a partnership with Col. Henry H. Trimble, under the firm name of Trimble and Baldwin, which business relation was continued for many years, except during the interval when Colonel Trimble was Judge of the District Court.

Mr. Baldwin was forty years of age when he entered the legal profession, but he had had a wide business experience, and was a wise counsellor. He was not only capable of giving to a client a sound opinion as to his legal rights but that sensible form of legal advice which often prevents or settles litigation.

During his long career at the bar he always held the confidence of the public, the respect of the courts and the hearty good will of his associates.

The writer recalls some notable causes which he managed with unusual skill and great success, among them the well-known Avery case, wherein he secured priority for a large right of way claim over a railway mortgage. I recollect that his conduct of this case called forth the admiration of Hon. Samuel F. Miller, who was opposing counsel, and was soon thereafter appointed by Abraham Lincoln to be a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States—the beginning of an illustrious judicial career.

Mr. Baldwin's greatest legal triumph was, perhaps, in the case of Tribelcock vs. Wilson, 12 Wallace, 687, in the Supreme Court of the United States. This case arose during the Civil War upon a note secured by land mortgage, executed prior to the passage of the "Legal Tender Act"—the note being drawn payable "in gold and silver coin of the United States."

The opinion of the Supreme Court delivered by Justice Field (Justices Bradley and Miller dissenting), in January, 1872, settled for all time the great question that such an agreement was enforceable and the creditor entitled to payment in coin as stipulated in the contract.

The principle involved was of great importance and the cause excited wide public interest at the time, it being held by the Supreme Court a year after argument and pending its final decision.

The case was prepared and carried through the Supreme Court by Mr. Baldwin. The District Court at home (Judge Trimble presiding) held adversely to his contention. He appealed to the Supreme Court of Iowa and was beaten there. He thereupon appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States and secured a reversal and a signal victory for the great doctrine of the inviolability of contract, for which he was contending.

The principle involved was of scarcely less importance than that in the celebrated Dartmouth College case which gave such fame to Daniel Webster as a Constitutional lawyer.

Mr. Cleveland appointed Mr. Baldwin postmaster at Keosauqua, which position he held for four years. In his early political career he affiliated with the Whig party, and in 1852 was elected Clerk of the District Court. He was bitterly opposed to the Know-Nothing party, because of the secrecy of its organization, which had something to do with his opposition to the Republican party during the period of its infancy. In 1856 he cast his lot with the Democratic party and acted with it during the rest of his life, and its continued minority position in Van Buren county was undoubtedly the cause which prevented his receiving greater political preferment.

Early in the Civil war he raised a cavalry company in this county and tendered it for the Third Iowa Cavalry then recruiting at Keokuk, but the regiment was practically full and his recruits were distributed to other companies.

Independence and integrity were perhaps the predominating traits of Mr. Baldwin's character. He did his own thinking, and followed his own convictions. His honesty was not just the common honesty of the man who keeps his contracts, pays his debts and does not steal. It was the higher intellectual honesty which looks facts squarely in the face and conforms opinion to them rather than makes facts conform to his opinions. In private matters, he could see the other men's rights quite as clearly as his own. In public affairs, he was frank, open and outspoken; he never believed a thing or pretended to because it was popular, and never advocated a thing he did not believe. Indeed, on public questions he was often in the minority, and often in the right. His legal learning, high sense of justice, and strong hatred of fraud and double-dealing would have made him a fine equity judge.

He died poor, but with the knowledge that he had lived his life well, paid his way, had contributed more to the world than he had cost, did not owe any man a dollar or an unreturned kindness, and that he left enough of this world's goods to carry his lifelong helpmate with comfort through the remainder of her journey. Such men as he, self-effacing but self-respecting; well informed without being pedantic; conservatively progressive; honored and admired by their neighbors, but never taking the center of the stage; moral, upright and devoted to their homes and families, and believing sincerely that the world moves and that they must help it move, are to be found in almost every county seat in Iowa. They are not so numerous as to be in the way, nor so common but that they are admired and looked up to by their neighbors.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.