

THE PALIMPSEST

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A Diligent Public Servant

William Boyd Allison's congressional career of more than forty-three years was closed by death in August, 1908, shortly after he was nominated for his seventh term in the United States Senate. Such a long public career — one of the longest in American history — and a life that reached nearly four score years stimulate reflections. To some who may remember Allison's death, the names of Benjamin Harrison, James G. Blaine, and Walter Q. Gresham are the echo of another generation. Yet these men, his serious rivals for the Republican presidential nomination in 1888, were all his juniors — and they all preceded him to the grave. That unruffled, wakeful, and thin little boss, Thomas C. Platt, who was influenced by Chauncey M. Depew's objection to Allison, and who defeated Allison by delivering the seventy-two votes of New York to Harrison, let the reins of his power slip from his icy fingers

within two years after Allison's death. Platt's favorite, Depew, another contender in the convention of 1888, and the last surviving candidate of that year, yet lives to recall a too obscure chapter in American politics and the time when the president of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad could aspire to the presidency of the United States.

James A. Garfield, James G. Blaine, and William B. Allison all entered the House of Representatives in 1863. Two other men, Justin S. Morrill and John Sherman, with whom Mr. Allison worked in shaping the financial policy of the country, had already risen to important committee places. They were Allison's seniors, and the longer and nearly parallel service of the former and the more distinguished and varied service of the latter closed before the end of the nineteenth century. The Rhode Island grocer, Nelson W. Aldrich, arrived in Washington fifteen years later than Allison and retired from the Senate in 1911 under a cloud of popular distrust.

During his public life, Allison saw the weathercock of popular opinion point in many directions. His own political activities partly illustrate these changes; and so wisely did he sense them that, whether he yielded or resisted, his reputation for sound judgment steadily rose. He participated in a Free Soil campaign in Ohio, and was a delegate from Iowa to the convention that nominated Lincoln

in 1860. He fought the "copperheads"; he was a radical when the term connoted fervid patriotism; he hesitated on protection, dallied with silver, and became orthodox on both. Stirred by the ideals which created the Republican party, he was depressed by the drab days of the seventies; and, after the arrival of "big business", with an easy and urbane temper, he accommodated himself to its creatures, who had never breathed the classical atmosphere of an ante-bellum academy, and who thought that, because one would not keep a ledger for its own sake, one should not read a classic for the same reason. Having cautiously ridden through the Populistic storm, he lent the weight of his great experience and skilful seamanship to sailing in waters where the Progressive storm was soon to break. Finally, his life, which began two days before John Quincy Adams quitted the Executive Mansion and two days before the Westerners at Jackson's inaugural ball soiled the upholstering with their muddy boots, ended when William Howard Taft was running for President on a platform which pledged his party to revise the tariff.

John Allison, the father of William Boyd, was born in Bellefont, Pennsylvania, in 1798. The Allisons had come from Ireland and a number of them had served in the American army during the Revolution. It is not known what were the circumstances of John Allison's father. Whether pressed by the poverty which attended so many of the eighteenth

century Scotch-Irish settlers in America or urged by the spirit of adventure, John Allison moved out on the Ohio frontier in 1823 and settled near Perry in what is now Ashland County.

It was there that William Boyd Allison was born on March 2, 1829. His first home was a log house in the timber, which extended in every direction, broken only by a few clearings and still rarer villages. Eighty acres of forest yield but slowly to the labor of one family, and young Allison probably helped with the clearing and attended log-rollings where hard labor was relieved by coarse jokes and whisky. The Indians were no longer dangerous, but malaria and the unceasing toil of pioneers still took their toll of life. Such a country would seem to offer no prospect to a youth but to clear fields as his father had, to till them, and to sink into a grave with hands knotted by labor and rheumatism, with a back bent by lifting logs, and with a stomach ruined by salt pork and lye hominy.

The fact is, however, that opportunity opened before many a youth who looked out from the rude pioneer settlements in that quarter of the world where lived "about the best human material that America had ever seen". An Irish family of three or four generations in America found itself in a State where New Englanders had planted schools. During the winter months, Allison, who could not, like Joseph H. Choate, boast that his education had begun a hundred years before his birth, walked two

miles, probably by a road where the axe had cleared scarcely more than a trail to the "Old Field School". At sixteen he entered Wooster Academy, where he studied for two years. "Big-eyed Bill", as he was known, was an awkward, over-grown, good-humored youngster whom the girls liked to tease none the less because he ran after them and kissed them when he caught them. This boy, who never wore suspenders and was always hitching up his trousers, who had a strong tobacco breath, and who never told the teachers about his tormentors, soon showed that he had good stuff in him. The greenhorn who walked in from the farm every morning and who excited so many uncontrolled snickers was something more than a butt for jokes. He soon excelled in mathematics, studied Latin and Greek, and probably surveying which was the practical subject of that day. Debating also engrossed the attention of the youths of an age which had not libelled energy by calling it "pep".

From Wooster Academy, Allison went to Allegheny College at Meadville, Pennsylvania, where he remained one year. Then he taught a country school for a year and this experience was followed by a year in Western Reserve College at Hudson, Ohio. "Big-eyed Bill" was, in the vernacular of a later day, beginning "to arrive". He was twenty-one and had been in college two years. While serving as deputy to the county clerk of Ashland County, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1852.

Clients were not numerous at first, and it is said that the young attorney diligently studied history, politics, and finance. But the fact that such studies engaged a young attorney waiting for clients is not all one would wish to know. The political atmosphere of his home and the uneasy stirrings of the period when he had to make his choice of party allegiance are important. William B. Allison's father was an "Old Line" Whig who had voted for Clay in 1824. Whatever newspapers reached the frontier home must have been chosen according to this bias. Hence young Allison's earliest political faith must have included the Whig casuistry on slavery, an interest in protection, and a passion for internal improvements. A nation facing a great moral question was to be saved by turnpikes and canals.

In 1846, the first year Allison was in Wooster Academy, Ohio mustered only eleven thousand votes for the repeal of the Black Laws. Lowell's *The Present Crisis* was fresh from the press. Iowa was admitted into the Union as the first free State west of the Mississippi River. It was the year of the Wilmot Proviso, and the following spring a little New England boy, John D. Long, who was later to preside over the Navy Department during the war with Spain confided to his diary how wicked was our war with Mexico.

But popular opinion moved rapidly in the nine years from 1847 to 1855, and Allison grew from an

awkward school boy to a rising young attorney who was sent as a delegate to the Anti-Nebraska Republican Convention which nominated Salmon P. Chase for Governor. It was a period of political ferment. Chase had left the Democratic ranks, and Allison quitted the sinking hull of the Whig party. The next year he took an active part locally in support of John C. Frémont for President.

In 1857 when Allison was twenty-eight, he moved to Dubuque and became a law partner of B. M. Samuels. At that time Dubuque offered an attractive field, having grown in twenty years from a straggling village with a mayor's office among the green stumps to a city of fifteen thousand. Property had risen to amazing values. Almost one thousand steamboats touched its wharves yearly. Three railroads reached the shore opposite Dubuque, and four projecting west and north from the city seemed to make it certain to be the distributing point for that vast region already penetrated for twenty miles by the Dubuque and Pacific Railroad.

Mr. Allison entered into an active practice. His transition from a struggling attorney in a small Ohio village to an important lawyer in a metropolis of the Northwest was rapid. The annals of America furnish examples of more restless spirits hastening West at earlier ages, but if Mr. Allison had been in no hurry to come West, he quickly began to play his part. Within fifteen years he served another apprenticeship in local politics, raised four regiments

to help suppress the rebellion of the South, represented his district eight years in the lower house of Congress, and won a seat in the United States Senate.

The young statesman did not practice at the bar long enough nor did law ever so engross his attention that his legal pursuits merit more than the barest mention in a sketch like this. His military service engaged him scarcely more than a year. During that time he was on Governor Kirkwood's staff with the rank of colonel, he raised four regiments, and managed his own commissary and quartermaster departments. After a while he fell sick from exposure and overwork, and returned to politics.

Politics was his profession. Within two years after coming to Iowa, he was a delegate to the Republican convention that nominated Samuel J. Kirkwood for Governor. The next year, 1860, he was a delegate to the Republican State Convention and also to the national convention where he first supported Chase but later joined the Lincoln throng.

In the spring of 1862, while yet on Governor Kirkwood's staff, Colonel Allison conceived the idea of allowing the enlisted men to vote in the autumn election. Governor Kirkwood and Senator Grimes were both impressed by the suggestion, a special session of the General Assembly was called to pass the necessary legislation, and the soldiers had the opportunity of helping to save the Union party at

the polls as well as the Union cause on the field of battle.

Colonel Allison was nominated for Congress in the summer of 'sixty-two. His Democratic rival was Dennis A. Mahony, a Dubuque editor who did not conceal his Southern sympathies and whose address was a Washington prison during the campaign. In Iowa the campaign was bitterly waged. The political fortunes of the administration were at a low ebb and the patriots in the North had their work to do, when "the cause might be as fatally lost at the ballot box as on the battle field". The Third Congressional District of Iowa was one of the fronts. Colonel Allison won.

He took his seat in the Thirty-eighth Congress on December 7, 1863. Gettysburg and Vicksburg were behind: reconstruction cast its ominous shadow before. Congress faced both the difficulties of war and the problems of settlement. As to the former, the policy of the government on questions of finance, enlistments, emancipation, and the exercise of war powers was already fixed, either by the design of leaders or the relentless and hastening force of circumstances. Thus in his first term, Allison voted for new loans, for the continuance of the bounty system, for the amendment of the national bank act, for the Thirteenth Amendment, and for the Wade-Davis plan of reconstruction by Congress.

Allison's four terms in the House of Representatives cover the period from 1863 to 1871. They were

years in which statesmen, embarrassed by the bitter feuds, the obstinacy of opposing personalities, and the provocations and errors of men too attached to dogmas, which mark the political reconstruction of the South, had to achieve important adjustments of the currency and of taxation. Nor did Representative Allison escape the hate which mars the record of that period. He made an elaborate and bitter speech in favor of confiscating the lands of the rebels, he supported the reconstruction measures of the radicals, and he took an active part in the impeachment of President Johnson.

The record of the Congressman from the third Iowa district on the post-war problems of currency and taxation was uneven. On the former he vacillated, while in connection with the latter he showed wisdom, statesmanlike poise, and laborious usefulness. He voted with the majority of the House on December 18, 1867, when it pledged itself to carry out Secretary Hugh McCulloch's policy of contracting the currency and of resuming specie payments. He then supported a bill which provided a drastic scheme of contraction. After this bill had failed to receive a majority, he voted with the inflationists against the compromise measure which became a law. Two years later he voted against the hard money men to stop any contraction whatever.

But on the readjustment of taxation Representative Allison needs no apologist. At the beginning of his second term, he was placed on the Committee on

Ways and Means, and at once took an important part in framing tariff and internal revenue bills. Such measures required endless labor and minute information about the conditions of business, of foreign and domestic manufactures, and of commerce. During the war, heavy taxes had been levied upon domestic manufactures, and they had been protected from foreign competition by compensatory duties which also yielded abundant revenues. Scarcely an internal tax or an import duty could be changed which did not involve the readjustment of the rates on many other articles in order to save business from a too violent shock. Mr. Allison seemed to have remembered Burke's dictum that one "would do more by figures of arithmetic than by figures of rhetoric". He attended the House constantly when tax bills were pending, to bear his full share of the labor of explaining administrative details and legal difficulties of enforcement, comparing proposed rates, and estimating revenue. Sometimes when an amendment was offered, he would explain that it had been anticipated by a paragraph not yet reached. He would call attention to the fact that certain amendments belonged elsewhere, that the House had already decided certain points by accepting or rejecting amendments, or that disputed rates had been reserved for consideration until other sections of the bill were decided. Such activity does not win the applause of galleries, nor does it make interesting reading to be franked to constituents, but it is a

necessary and no small part of the labor of governing a nation.

During Allison's eight years in the House, the Republicans were not united on the policy of protection. The protectionists enjoyed the vantage-ground of already having either protective or prohibitive duties. Every reduction of the internal revenue, which was popular, left them a proportionately greater quantity of Morrill's health-giving tonic in the guise of compensatory duties. Some Western members of Congress, whose constituents were interested in cheap rails for their railroads, protested against the excessive nursing Thaddeus Stevens secured for Pennsylvania's infant iron and steel industries. Allison was one of those who braved Stevens's raillery about the secessionist relic of free trade being located along the Mississippi River. On all the test votes he sided against those who were demanding higher duties. The protective duties granted to the iron and woolen interests excited his anger, and he accused protectionists of bad faith, since they had secured reductions of internal taxes on their products by letting it be understood they would agree to reductions of the import duties. He joined with the moderate tariff group to force from Blaine a promise to appoint Garfield chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means. Blaine promised what they asked, got their votes for the speakership, and then appointed Henry L. Dawes, a protectionist, chairman.

In 1870, Allison made his longest speech on the tariff. It was an able indictment of the duties which certain interests enjoyed, and a review of the means by which such rates had been secured. He pointed out how the high tariff limited the market of our agricultural class and injured our merchant marine. But the protectionists had sent their free literature throughout the Northwest, had organized associations, and had contributed large sums to mold public sentiment. In short the Northwest was "sold" to the idea of protecting home industry and American labor. A year later, when a candidate for the United States Senate, Allison's friends had to apologize for his tariff record and he himself made speeches to the Iowa farmers about a judicious adjustment of the duties which would protect "any legitimate industry" and he did not "know any Republican who would seek to place the American laborer on a par with the European".

Senator Allison, from his entrance into the Senate in 1873 to his death, generally exercised a moderating influence upon the tariff policy of his party. He opposed the formation of the tariff commission in 1883 as a scheme to delay a needed revision of internal revenues and import duties, and he opposed the action of Congress in raising the duties recommended by the tariff commission. In 1888, while the Mills Bill was before the House, he was chairman of a sub-committee instructed to prepare a substitute for the House bill. His work on this committee and

the testimony which he took became the basis of the McKinley tariff. In 1897 he had charge of the Dingley tariff in the Senate.

In connection with the tariff, a singularly typical labor of Senator Allison deserves notice. During the years 1885 to 1887, he was chairman of a committee which was charged with investigating the collection of customs duties. Its labors included an investigation of the New York, Boston, and other custom houses, the tricks of evasion, the rules and regulations of classifying and appraising imports, and the means of detecting frauds. His committee reported a bill which became law and effected a complete revision of the customs regulations.

Senator Allison's name is connected with a compromise silver bill which, whatever embarrassment it caused the Treasury, had at least the merit of preventing free coinage at a time when European countries were ready to dispose of their silver. He could hardly be supposed, in 1878, to know that silver was destined to run a wilder course in the next twenty years than it had in the previous two centuries. He held that not to use silver would work a hardship and an injustice upon the debtor class, that free coinage would place the United States upon a silver basis and bring a train of disastrous results, and that the growth of population, the increased volume of business, and the contraction of the national bank notes due to the payment of the national debt obligated the government to supply

more money. Hence he favored the limited coinage of silver, the seigniorage going to the government; and, since there was a great volume of legal-tender money abroad, he thought that we could secure an international agreement to fix the value of silver provided we made it clear that European countries had no prospect of profit by our undertaking the free coinage of silver alone. He supported with hesitation the Sherman Silver Act of 1890, and three years later was active in securing its repeal. President Harrison made him chairman of the American delegation to the Brussels international conference in 1892, to secure bimetallism. Finally he supported the adoption of the gold standard in 1900.

A public career as long as Senator Allison's gives an opportunity for captious flings at its inconsistencies. Changes of opinion can be defended on the honorable ground that the lessons of experience justify abandoning any *a priori* position, though one may suspect that the murmurs of the multitude were quite as impressive as any empirical teachings. Senator Allison voted for the prodigal land grants to the railroads, which were not the least important events of the overcrowded sixties. He supported the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 — though pointing out some of the legal difficulties which it later encountered — and helped to clear up the ambiguities from which the original bill suffered. In 1906 he had an active part in steering the Hepburn Act through the Senate. It is significant that a

man who was not shocked by the vicious lobbying which attended the passage of the land grant to the Northern Pacific Railroad could, nearly forty years later, enjoy the confidence of President Roosevelt during the passage of the Hepburn Act.

Soon after entering the Senate, Allison was made chairman of a committee which was instructed to investigate the government of the District of Columbia and make recommendations. A bill was reported which was accepted by Congress and the President, reorganizing the finances of the District and fixing the form of government which still exists with only minor changes.

Senator Allison became chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs in 1875, which he held until 1881. As chairman of a commission appointed to treat with the Sioux Indians, he made two recommendations which became the fundamental principles of the Indian policy adopted twelve years later: the legal establishment of private property among the Indians, and more generous provision for their education.

In 1881 he was made chairman of the Committee on Appropriations of which he had been a member for eleven years, and he served as chairman during the next quarter of a century. Besides this, when he died he held second place on the Committee on Finance and was a member of the Senate steering committee. Other honors were offered him. Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley wanted him to be

Secretary of the Treasury, but he declined. McKinley earnestly solicited him to accept the vice-presidential nomination in 1900, but he preferred to remain in the Senate. And the last special mark of respect and confidence which he received was a place on the commission sent to Europe in 1908, to study banking systems. Ill health prevented his going, and before the summer passed he died.

The career of Senator Allison does not easily lend itself to appraisal. He was usually a moderate tariff man, yet he is credited with being the author of the indefensible tin-plate schedules of the McKinley tariff. He was reported to have sneered at Hayes's idea of civil service reform in 1876, but in 1888, Hayes, whose first choice was Sherman, thought Allison an especially good man for President. He voted to pass a river and harbor bill over President Arthur's veto, but his careful scrutiny trimmed many a vicious item from appropriation bills. In 1871, when he was running for the United States Senate, his friends could represent him as a supporter of Grant's administration, while at the same time he had the favor of the liberals in the party. Eastern Republicans regarded him and his Western friends in 1888 as dangerous on account of their opposition to the railroads to which they had previously voted generous land grants; yet twenty years later he died, an acknowledged conservative and a trusted counselor of President Roosevelt. Senator R. F. Pettigrew has declared him to be a tool of the

railroad interests, ever slipping into conference reports the provisions his masters desired; yet he enjoyed the confidence of the people of Iowa through a long period of many upheavals. He numbered among his friends Garfield and Conkling, Dolliver and Aldrich.

Perhaps in actual government men do not differ as widely as the public would have them. Senator Allison's methods and appearance were well calculated to lessen rather than aggravate differences of opinions. In 1863, he was described as mild and gentle, well-dressed and handsome, smoking constantly and chatting easily. In 1879, playing the rôle of a gentle peacemaker between contending factions was a natural faculty. In 1886, years but added dignity to a graceful figure distinguished by brown eyes and dark brown hair. Such a person must have taken the sharp edge off many a give-and-take in committee room and Senate chamber.

It is characteristic of Allison's public labor that he was so long engaged in the prosaic task of explaining items of appropriation bills. There is nothing to excite the popular imagination in explaining the need of increasing the allowance for salaries in an assay office, of supplying the deficiency for building a post-office in a remote town, and of repairing the locks in a canal. Such, however, was the work of Senator Allison throughout a whole generation. Such also is a large part of governmental activities. "It is well known to Senators," said Allison on the

occasion of the death of Orville H. Platt, "though not apparent often to the general public, that there is a large amount of what might be called 'drudgery work' necessary to be done in the committees and in the Senate, which is very important but not of such general public interest as to attract the attention of the country. This work must be done by those competent and faithful in the discharge of their public duties."

That statement is a fitting summary and eulogy of his own life. There is something singularly impressive in visioning him explaining hundreds of paragraphs of tax bills in the late sixties, and watching him through the sweep of forty years performing the same arduous labor. In the evening of life he could still toss off a day's work with an ease and rapidity which amazed younger men. Like Burke he knew much "of public industry in its exertions". Carrying on the government was his profession.

VERNON COOPER