

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Robert Lucas

There are at least three known portraits of Iowa's first Governor, Robert Lucas. One is a water color painting of a young man in uniform with a high crowned hat decorated with a military cockade. It represents, no doubt, the period of Lucas's life when he was a somewhat swashbuckling young officer in the Ohio militia. The view is a profile and shows a rather long nose and prominent brows; but the mouth — too well-shaped for reality — and the large dark eye, make one suspect that the artist did not get them from life but culled them from some drawing manual which provided sample illustrations of human features for the benefit of young draughtsmen. Naturally there is little of character reflected in this picture.

But in the second portrait the subject has laid aside his military hat and epauletted coat, arrayed himself in the black stock and white linen and severe coat of civilian life and turned his face to the front.



It is a strong face with a mien somewhat stern and imperious. The portrait is that of a man in middle life and probably shows him as he looked in his years as a legislator and Governor of Ohio.

His hair is combed up and back like a modern pompadour, leaving a high expanse of forehead. His eyes are set wide apart under level, strongly marked eyebrows. His nose is long and slightly aquiline, his mouth straight and his chin square. The general shape and set of his head give the impression of a spare-framed wiry man of erect and unrelaxing carriage.

The third picture is that of an old man. In his seventy-second year, Lucas wrote of having a daguerreotype taken and remarked: "It is thought to be a good likeness." No doubt it is from this primitive photograph that George Yewell painted the oil portrait which shows Robert Lucas as Iowans must have known him. The picture is much like the second. It faces unequivocally to the front, a black stock wraps itself about the white collar whose wide-spread points rise up on each side of his chin. His hair is still combed up and back away from his forehead, but it has turned white with the years.

In his face one can read the story of his tempestuous governorship in the new Territory west of the Mississippi. Every feature has sharpened and intensified its characteristics. His nose is thinner than ever and his nostrils curve up like those of a restive horse. His high wide cheek bones seem more pro-



nounced and the cheeks below them thinner. But in the eyes and the mouth particularly the story has written itself. The mouth has tightened into a thin line of habitual determination as if the continual practice of pressing his lips together had set them there in an unrelaxing union. And the eyes. Deep-set beneath the straight ledge of white eyebrows, they burn with an intensity that was merely hinted at in his earlier portrait. There is a sternness in them that must have seemed almost malignant to his enemies.

Uncompromising he was, beyond the venture of a doubt; and as he slipped over into his seventies the mellowing years seemed to have failed to soften the expression which had settled upon his face in the long years of a stormy career.

Now that the reader has looked upon these portraits it may be well to turn back to the story of the life of this vehement figure if only to find the three portraits matched by periods of his existence. Lucas was by heritage a Quaker, but his father had been a Revolutionary soldier, and the paths of peace he himself was seldom content to tread. He was an enthusiastic militia man and rose to the grade of major general in the Ohio organization.

His life as a young man in pioneer Ohio was full of turbulence; and it was probably mixed with some lawlessness. In 1810 a suit was brought against him and the sheriff of Scioto County attempted to take him into custody. Lucas, however, resisted ar-



rest. He was a formidable and determined man, a prominent officer of the militia, and he had many friends in the community. The sheriff decided to resign his office rather than persist in his dangerous duties. Thereupon the coroner, upon whom the task then devolved, also resigned. Lucas then swore vengeance upon the clerk who issued the writ and he too resigned.

But men were soon found who would make the arrest, and a small posse proceeded to Brown's tavern where Lucas was then living at Portsmouth, Ohio, and started with him to the jail. As the procession got under way, John Brown, tavern-keeper and father-in-law of Lucas, fiery in disposition but small in stature, tried to effect a rescue. One of the larger men of the posse, however, rudely threw him into a clump of jimson weed and the son-in-law remained in the hands of the law.

Lucas, from the secure fastnesses of the jail, cast about for some means of escape, and the militia occurred to him. So he wrote letters to various officers asking them to come to the rescue of their unfortunate commander. Eighteen years later, when he was running for State senator, an opposing newspaper printed one of these letters written to a militia captain, asking that he and his men gather at Mr. Brown's and unite in supporting the constitution of the State by coming to the defense of their constitutional officer whom the revolutionist party had by violence forced into prison. On the fold of



the letter was a list of the five men of the posse and opposite the names this legend: "The dam raskels that mobbed me". But though in that year Lucas had succeeded to the duties of a brigadier general, there is no evidence that the militia effected a jail delivery.

As early as 1803 he was interested in military affairs, being engaged in that year upon one occasion in recruiting volunteers for the Ohio militia. When the United States ship Chesapeake was fired upon by a British commander in 1807, Lucas was called upon to furnish a company from his regiment to hold itself in readiness for immediate active service, an invasion of Canada being in contemplation. The company was formed by volunteers from the regiment and they chose Lucas to act as their captain. The occasion for action, however, did not materialize. In the War of 1812 there was real need of military duty, and Lucas served under General Hull at Detroit. He must have continued his interest in military affairs after the war was over for in February, 1816, he was elected major general of the 2d division of the Ohio militia.

But the business of politics now engrossed him. He had been sent to the lower house of the Ohio legislature in 1808, and after the War of 1812 he was elected to the State senate. From 1814 to 1832, with the exception of only four scattering years he served in the legislature of the State of Ohio. He was a Democrat, an ardent supporter of Andrew



Jackson. In fact he looked like Jackson, he had come up through somewhat similar experiences, and he had many characteristics that matched those of Old Hickory.

In May, 1832, at Baltimore, Lucas had the honor of presiding over the first national convention ever held by the Democratic Party and then he came home to a campaign that landed him in the Governor's chair at Columbus. In 1830 he had been an unsuccessful candidate for the governorship of Ohio, but in 1832 he was elected by a large majority, and two years later he was chosen to fill a second term.

He was now in the prime of life. He had come from Virginia to Ohio a generation before when it was not yet a State. He had surveyed land in the new country, had helped organize its militia, and had served for many years as legislator. Too early for railroads, he had pushed persistently for a widespread system of canals. He had seen Ohio grow from a wilderness with only here and there a solitary settlement to a State with more than a million inhabitants and hundreds of thriving towns.

Meanwhile he had learned to control the impetuosity of his youth and turn his energy into constructive channels. He still loved and hated with intensity, and he always would. But now, his enemies instead of being "the dam raskels that mobbed him" became invested with terms more polite if not less positive. Positiveness was fundamental in the psy-



chology of Lucas. He made up his mind definitely and held to his opinions unswervingly. Yet it must be conceded that his decisions were usually backed by a sound judgment and common sense.

The most enlivening episode in the period of his governorship was the Ohio-Michigan boundary dispute. A strip of land between Ohio and the Territory of Michigan was claimed by both, and at one time Governor Lucas, with 600 Ohio militiamen, glared across the line from Perrysburg at Stevens T. Mason, the "Boy Governor" of Michigan, who had gathered about a thousand troops behind him at Toledo. Both Governors were determined and the citizens of State and Territory were inflamed, but Lucas refused to make it a struggle between State and Territory, claiming that it was a question between Ohio and the United States; and though over-patriotic Buckeyes assured him they would "follow him through blood to their eyes", he averted bloodshed and the question was settled by granting the disputed tract to Ohio and admitting Michigan to the Union with a peace-offering in the shape of an addition of land beyond Lake Michigan.

When he laid down the duties of Governor he was quite desirous of becoming United States Senator. It was the third time he had been considered for this post, and now he felt that he was the logical man for the position. But he was disappointed. A much younger man was chosen. The fruits of his long career of public service were to be used in an-



other and far different field, for his friends at Washington secured his appointment as Governor of the newly created Territory of Iowa, out on the frontier of the nation's growth.

Lucas was of a race of pioneers. Born in western Virginia a few weeks before the surrender of Yorktown, he had come to Ohio just as he reached maturity and there he grew up with the country for a third of a century. Now, as he journeyed down the Ohio River by steamboat to his new post in 1838, he found himself at the age of 57 coming again into a land of beginnings, a region of scattered settlements and primitive political life. The new Territory could well profit by the political experience of Robert Lucas. And his well formulated ideas on such questions as education, gambling and intemperance, and public improvements were worth their consideration. But he had a stormy time for three years.

His first conflict was with William B. Conway, the Secretary of the Territory. Conway was a very young and very ambitious man. He arrived in Iowa before Lucas, and taking prompt advantage of the provision of the Organic Act which made the Secretary a sort of vice-Governor, he began forthwith to occupy himself with the duties of the major office. When Lucas arrived it was difficult for the young man to step down. Relations between the two men became increasingly difficult. Conway next quarreled with the legislative assembly but soon patched up his differences with the law-makers and made



common cause with them in an altercation which they had developed with Governor Lucas over Territorial expenditures and the veto power.

The Governor, in accordance with well-fixed principles of his political faith, used the power of veto which the Organic Act gave him. The legislators rebelled even so far as to ask the President of the United States to remove him from office. They were unsuccessful but the veto power was changed to a limited form.

He attacked with vehemence the prevalent frontier vices of gambling and intemperance, and refused to appoint any man guilty of these habits to an office. This made him enemies who succeeded in getting his appointive power reduced. He arraigned the habit of carrying concealed weapons, and referred to the recent killing of a member elect of the legislature by a prominent Burlington attorney, and thus made another bitter foe. He pointed out the extravagance of the legislative expenditures and the looseness of Secretary Conway's accounts and still more men ranged themselves against him. But the Governor, unrelenting and uncompromising, pursued his way unmoved. Legislatures changed, Secretary Conway died, and public affairs took on a semblance of stability.

Another event occurred in which Lucas found himself more at harmony with his fellow citizens. A dispute arose as to the boundary between the Territory of Iowa and the State of Missouri. Lucas



surely was not without experience in this sort of controversy. But now he was the champion of the Territory rather than the State. He was just as positive. And he still maintained that the Territory could not oppose the State. Only as a representative of the United States government could he participate in any way. But in this capacity he had duties to uphold, and he supported the contention of the Territory with vigor.

Again occurred the spectacle of two conglomerate bodies of troops facing each other across a disputed tract of land, and again they disbanded without a clash, leaving the question to be decided as Lucas contended it should be — by the United States government. Theodore S. Parvin recorded in his diary: "The Border war turned to be a Humbug — troops returned — a drinking frolic followed."

With the change of presidential administration in 1841 Lucas was removed to make way for a Whig. He spent the remainder of his life for the most part in Iowa, serving as a prominent member of the Constitutional Convention of 1844, participating intermittently in public affairs, and dying at last in 1853 at his home on the edge of Iowa City.

As one turns back to the last portrait of Robert Lucas, the grim old face carries its own interpretation. The wide, high forehead bears out the impression of a mind that could reason clearly and logically, and look upon public matters with some foresight. The eyes, deep set and dominating, show an



intensity of spirit, and the unsmiling mouth bespeaks an inflexible determination. But in the eyes there is a suggestion of bitterness, and nowhere in the dramatic old face is there any indication of a quality that would have enriched his life and increased his influence among his fellow men—a sense of humor.

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