

LOUIS AGASSIZ¹

BY CHARLES D. WALCOTT

Louis Agassiz was a man of simple but intensely active life. Coming to us in 1848 for a special purpose, he met with so cordial a reception that flattering offers from European institutions could not induce him to return; and, although such a life as his cannot be limited by boundaries of space or time, we feel a peculiar pleasure and satisfaction in placing his name among those of our great men in this our Hall of Fame.

Agassiz was not only a pioneer in scientific investigation and achievement, but one of the first to combine the qualities of a great naturalist, leader of men, and lover of the masses of the people. We sometimes forget that many of the fundamental conceptions which underlie so much of the science of today are the products of his genius and the fruitage of his many years of labor. He taught American students how to think in terms of science, and he taught the American nation that to science it owed good will and cordial support.

Few men have lived who combined such breadth of intellect with such a fascinating personality, such genuine sincerity, such openness and warmth of manner, such depth of religious nature, such perfect unselfishness, and such devotion to science.

To Agassiz nothing was commonplace. He marshalled facts and ever kept them at command in the hope that they might throw light on some one of the great problems which he realized were to press more and more insistently for solution. The enduring value of his contributions to science is due to the soundness of the principles underlying them. At twenty-two years of age, Martius recognized his rare ability by allowing him to edit a volume on Brazilian fishes, and at twenty-five Cuvier transferred to him the treasures he had gathered for his work on fossil fishes. This early recognition stimulated him greatly and led him to master every subject that he undertook to investigate. Some one has said respecting him, that there never was a man with an "intellect more thoroughly disciplined

¹ Tribute to the memory of Agassiz at the unveiling of the Agassiz bust and tablet in the Hall of Fame, New York University, May 30, 1907.



LOUIS AGASSIZ

or less hampered by the abundance of the material on which it worked."

Agassiz's extraordinary geniality and the sincerity of his manner drew every one to him. The acknowledged leader of a group including Emerson, Holmes, Lowell, Longfellow, and Hawthorne, he was the friend of laborers and fishermen, who took a childish delight in gathering specimens for the "Great Professor." He measured men by a high standard, and created a new environment for himself. Those who loved him lived in mansions and in huts; he imbued the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, alike with an appreciation of the beauties of the science he loved and with his almost matchless enthusiasm for the noble in life. In fact, it was as a leader of men, as the teacher of thousands who gained inspiration and power from his boundless enthusiasm and his loving personality, that he was most widely known.

Agassiz's life was a continual proof of his superiority over self-interest and his consecration to science. He declared that he could not afford to waste his time in making money. He declined the chair of Zoölogy at Heidelberg when by accepting it he would have more than doubled his income, and he successfully opposed the making of his name a part of the official designation both of the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy at Harvard and of the Anderson School of Natural History on Penikese Island. It would be difficult to measure his influence in the way of causing men of political and commercial power to realize that the support of scientific research and the diffusion of the knowledge thereby gained depend largely on them.

Men are now more and more contributing to the advancement of science under the impulse of a sentiment Agassiz created; he set a new standard for the art of teaching; the first recognition of ice as a great geologic agent was due chiefly to his investigations; and, as a result of his work on fossil fishes, there was established a fundamental law which has since found expression in the words "Ontogeny repeats phylogeny"—a law which, it would seem, is destined to guide biologists for numberless generations.

Many of us knew Louis Agassiz personally, perhaps a few of us knew him intimately, and our admiration of his genius and our love of the man were and are almost unbounded. Here in this noble building we now place a visible token of this nation's admiration of his great intellect, of its realization of the debt it owes him for his consecration to science, and of its love for his simple but sublime

character, assured that the coming generations cannot fail to realize his claim to their regard as "the first naturalist of his time, a good citizen, and a good son, beloved of those who knew him."¹

¹ From a letter written by Louis Agassiz to his father from Munich, February 14, 1829. See J. B. Marcou: *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz*, 1, 1895, p. 30; and E. C. Agassiz: *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, 1893, p. 98.