

## THOMAS WILSON DORR

WHEN a man has been dead for over three quarters of a century and disinterested persons, who have no direct knowledge of either the man himself or of his times, can appraise him coolly and estimate the true value and purport of his life, he will either be dismissed briefly as an unimportant individual or he will be recognized at last as having been a man of prophetic vision, a great personality which lived in advance of its time. There was too much emotion surrounding the life and times of Thomas Wilson Dorr for him to have been judged impartially by his contemporaries. He is an especially fine example of a man who must lie for many decades in his grave while waiting to be exonerated and honored as he deserves.

What a confused affair the constitution issue in Rhode Island was! A few men on either side saw the facts clearly. But it is doubtful whether the bulk of adherents to either party understood the fundamental purposes and beliefs of their leaders. In addition, too many individuals were trying to reconcile cross purposes and conflicting opinions within their own minds to make their actions anything else but muddled. The result was much as might have been expected. The people's party of 1841 and 1842 was upon too insecure a footing, being an infant organization, to allow for any vacillation among its members. And it was its wavering which lost its righteous cause and brought bitter humiliation upon its uncompromising leader. There was a good deal of the same vacillation inherent among the supporters of the freehold government, but in that instance it did not matter as much. The long reign and the simple fact that, after all, it was the existing government gave it the necessary ounces of power which carried it through the crisis. If Dorr's followers could have seen his cause as we see it now, calmly and without excitement, they would have stood by him to a man, and their issue would have been easily realized.

Thomas Wilson Dorr was born in Providence, November 3, 1805. He was a son of Sullivan Dorr, a prominent manufacturer,

and Lydia (Allen) Dorr. He could trace his ancestry back to Joseph Dorr, a Massachusetts Bay settler of 1660. His grandfather, Ebenezer Dorr, had been captured with Paul Revere upon the latter's famous ride. Thomas Dorr went to Phillips' Exeter Academy and thence to Harvard, graduating from the latter institution in 1823 and carrying off second honors in his class. After that he went to New York and studied law under Kent and McCoun, both recognized as great equity judges and jurists. He made considerable of a reputation for himself as a profound student of law, and was shortly admitted to the bar in New York. Kent, himself, recognized Dorr's abilities and valued his convictions highly, and in later editions of his noted "Commentaries" incorporated various suggestions and changes which his young disciple had made.

In about 1830, Dorr returned to Providence to take up the practice of law. His progress in this city was slow, as is typical with all young lawyers, but particularly so in his case inasmuch as he was generally recognized as a student and not a practitioner in the profession. In 1833, he was elected a member of the lower house of the General Assembly from Providence. Thus was he started upon his tempestuous public career.

He had been a Federalist by birth and had grown up in a Federalist environment, but his principles quickly made of him an ardent Democrat. This was the first thing to throw him into disfavor among the ruling class of freeholders. In 1837, his career in the General Assembly came to an end for he had further estranged himself from the ruling faction by bringing to an end the "bank process" then established, which provided that a debtor's real estate should be attached, levied and sold on the same day that he failed to meet a note, thus excluding the claims of his other creditors in favor of the bank. But these were small milestones along this man's checkered course. His sympathy with those who were beginning to rise up against the existing government, which called itself republican but was nothing

more than an everlasting disgraced adherents.

Yet he was not the ownership of the suffrage principles. Rhode Island had passed a law limiting the suffrage to their oldest sons. One of the charter provisions of the other States, in Rhode Island, the constitution approved full suffrage. The framers believed that their constitution and as useful articles and did not change the status of the people with the years. In Providence, such a change creating a new class of owners who made a revolution. Thus according to the old constitution a small minority. As he saw the upheaval of Burrill, in that year of revolution in which he saw a State constitution change was brought would display the foreign and independent changing their form the power to do it no remedy but in assembly completely a new constitution

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life. A Federalist by birth and had grown up in a Federalist environment, but he quickly made of him an ardent Democrat. This was the first thing to draw disfavor among the ruling classes. In 1837, his career in the legislature came to an end for he had managed himself from the ruling class to an end the "bank war" which provided a precedent which should be attached, on the same day that he was elected, thus excluding the other creditors in favor of the State. These were small milestones along the way. His sympathy for the Democratic course. His sympathy for the Democratic course were beginning to rise up against the existing government, which was a Republican but was nothing

more than an oligarchy, threw him into everlasting disgrace with its "landed" adherents.

Yet he was not the first to assume the leadership of the suffrage party or espouse its principles. Rhode Island's General Assembly had passed an act way back in 1724 limiting the suffrage to landowners and their oldest sons. This continued as a part of the charter after the Revolution. Most of the other States, in fact all except Connecticut and Rhode Island, had drawn up constitutions approved by their people and giving full suffrage. The two New England States believed that their charters were as liberal and as useful articles of government as constitutions and did not bother to change. But the status of the people had been changing with the years. The growing industries in Providence, such as cotton spinning, were creating a new class of people, non-landowners who made up the bulk of the population. Thus those actually in power, according to the old land act, were really the small minority. And, even in 1797, some saw the upheaval that lay ahead. George R. Burrill, in that year, made a Fourth-of-July oration in which he spoke of the necessity of a State constitution. He said that, unless a change was brought about, Rhode Island would display the paradox of a "free, sovereign and independent people desirous of changing their form of government without the power to do it." He believed there was no remedy but in ignoring the General Assembly completely and proceeding to form a new constitution independently.

In 1821, 1822, and 1824, attempts were made to call a convention to draw up a constitution but they all failed. The land holders were still too powerful. In 1829, petitions for an extension of the suffrage were met with contempt by the privileged class in the General Assembly. Five years later a convention to consider ways and means of establishing a constitution was held in Providence, being attended by delegates from all the Rhode Island towns. Dorr was a delegate from Providence. When he made his report on the assembly, he attacked the existing charter vigorously, although stoutly maintaining his allegiance to the State and its founders. He believed, (and he was right in so doing) that at the close of the Revolu-

tion the charter was dissolved as an article of government, that the sovereignty of the King of England did not pass to the Governor and Assembly but rather to the people who had fought the battles of the Revolution and their descendants, and that the people of Rhode Island had the inherent right to establish a constitution (in their original capacity). His report showed that all other States, even Connecticut, had adopted constitutions. This report showed Dorr to be one of the ablest men in the State, a man to be feared by the landowners.

What happened in the swift years that followed is widely known. The General Assembly passed an act in 1834 requesting the freemen of the State to vote for general officers to choose delegates for a constitutional convention. But inasmuch as any extension of the franchise would be vetoed by this body, such a step had no importance, and the convention amounted to nothing. The Rhode Island Suffrage Association was organized in 1840 to agitate for a constitution. Petitions kept coming in for an enlargement of the suffrage. The General Assembly, in 1841, proposed a re-apportionment of delegates to its numbers on the basis of population, but this did not alleviate the approaching crisis.

A great parade, in April of 1841, inaugurated the Dorr movement, and many banners carried by the marchers had inscriptions which forecast the ominous future. Affairs moved swiftly from then on, and we find a People's Constitution drawn up by the Dorrites in December, 1841. A short three months later, the General Assembly authorized a similar constitution and drew up a constitution which granted suffrage. It was defeated because many of the landowners voted against it and because Dorr had not urged his followers to vote for it and they were under the impression that they could not do so. Had they done so they would have come into power and been able to set up a new order of government, and the Dorr War would have been avoided. As it was the General Assembly, waking up to the danger of the moment, passed an act making the officers in the Dorr movement guilty of treason and all their meetings illegal. But the act was not enforced, and the Dorrites increased in power. When the regular

elections came under the charter, the two governments were at bay, and the consequent failures of the Dorrites at the arsenal and their fort in Chepachet, the collapse of the whole movement, and Dorr's trial and imprisonment were soon over.

Dorr was a great benefactor and reformer of Rhode Island. His principles were absolutely right, but his failure to seize the psy-

chological moments of action and his too-great sense of logic caused his downfall. Though he erred in judgment and seemed to fail entirely, dying, in 1854, a broken man, his firm stand for the right had its influence and resulted in many of the privileges which Rhode Island citizens have today; and he, himself, must be listed high among Rhode Island's honored great.

## DOWN THE BAY

ELIJAH ORMSBEE's invention, in 1794, of a steamboat which would actually run, may have been the cause of considerable astonishment among the masters of the many sloop-rigged packets, that came to anchor in Narragansett Bay, but it certainly did not cause them to worry. They would have laughed at the mere suggestion that any vessels propelled by steam could ever supplant them and their time-honored sailing ships. Yet, the day was fast approaching when they would have to take the situation seriously, and see their trim vessels outdistanced and outdated.

The opening date of the era of steamboats, was 1817, an era which has lasted up to the present day. In that year the ugly little steamer, "Firefly," made her first appearance in Rhode Island waters when she steamed from New York to Newport in about twenty-eight hours. To those accustomed to seeing the slim and graceful sailing ships, this tiny vessel with awkward lines and black smoke was a bitter disappointment. Puffing and wheezing, she continued to Providence, where huge crowds of interested spectators were at the dock to catch a first glimpse of her. Among these who were not only disappointed in the appearance of the new invention, but also had other reasons for dissatisfaction, were the captains of the packets. However, it was a month later, when the "Firefly" went down the Bay to Newport to get President Monroe and bring him to Providence, that their active opposition began. A bitter rivalry arose between these packet-captains and the officers of the "Firefly," the former

making it their business to stand upon the wharf just prior to the departure of the "Firefly" on her regular trips down the Bay and offer to carry all passengers to Newport for a quarter, or for nothing at all if they could not beat the time of the "Firefly." These captains knew well that their packets were capable of beating the slow little steamer, and after a short while they succeeded in driving the "Firefly" from this port.

This triumph was to be short-lived, however, for by 1821 the steamboat had come to stay. In this year the first steamboat excursion was made by the Robert Fulton and steamboats were no longer an oddity on the water route between Providence and New York. The packet owners tried to introduce two bills into the Rhode Island Assembly, one restricting the landing of passengers from steamboats on the shores of the State and the other imposing a 50c tax on all passengers on steamboats. Needless to say, neither became a law.

The early sound steamers, the "Fulton" and the "Connecticut," made one round trip each week between New York and Providence until November, when the "Fulton" would be removed, the "Connecticut" continuing until hindered by the ice.

During the ten or twenty years immediately following the action of the packet captains, new steamers appeared regularly. In 1825, the "Washington" was put into service. She was 131 feet long and was the first steamer to have a pair of beam engines, each independent of the other. Two years later the "Chancellor Livingston" was taken off the Albany-New York route and

placed on the position boat to come successful. Franklin" was waters by the Livingston." Banned the famous "Benjamin" very little difference, two, however, steamers as were

In 1831, the ran down and sailing a fog in the "Boston" was the of Captain Comstock steamer to be and sails. As called the "Providence Steamer" the "Boston" ship of the lines out "President" and formed the main line. The "Chancellor Livingston" to other lines of

With the completion were bright boat lines. They stage coach route made possible the popular way via Providence, Providence steamer an epidemic of a quarantine and the steamboat their activities for year.

In 1835, Commodore the steamboat to take a decided in Narragansett Captain Comstock "Massachusetts" commanded. She was the famous T founded by Vander to New York in the rival steamship slashed without effort to monopolize business war extended