Indianapolis Newspaper Accounts of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered at least two lectures in Indianapolis, Indiana, during the course of his extensive western lecture tours. The files of Indianapolis newspapers establish that he spoke in Indianapolis on Tuesday, January 27, 1863, and Tuesday, February 13, 1866. Both lectures were in the Indianapolis Masonic Hall, then the town’s most prominent and largest assembly room, located at the southeast corner of West Washington Street and Capitol (then Tennessee) Avenue. The building has since been razed. General admission to the lecture was fifty cents; a reserved seat cost seventy-five cents.

Emerson apparently was in Indianapolis for six days in January, 1863, staying at the Bates House, now the Claypool Hotel, from Friday, January 23, to Wednesday, January 28. His extended visit seems to have resulted from the accidental occupancy of Masonic Hall during that time. Patriotic meetings devoted to some phase of the Civil War were held in the building almost every evening of the period.

Saturday morning, January 24, 1863, Emerson visited the Indianapolis Blind School, then located on North Meridian Street, on the site of the present esplanade of the American Legion Headquarters. The following report of this visit is found in the Indianapolis Journal, Monday, January 26, 1863: "Ralph Waldo Emerson—This distinguished philosopher and author has been in our city since Friday night, waiting an opportunity to deliver a lecture before the Young Men's Christian Association, the first of the season in every sense. The accidental occupancy of Masonic Hall every night till Tuesday night has caused the delay, which we hope will not be unprofitable or unpleasant to our distinguished visitor. On Saturday morning he visited the Blind Asylum, where he witnessed the examination of the different classes, and expressed himself highly pleased with the proficiency of the pupils and the course of instruction of the Asylum. At the conclusion of his visit the pupils were all summoned to the

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chapel, or lecture room, where they sang a spirited song and Mr. Emerson addressed them for a few minutes, congratulating them on the auspicious circumstances in which they were placed, and giving them reasons for feeling that, notwithstanding their misfortune, they had many means of happy and pleasant communication with the world. At the request of Mr. Churchman, who assured him that the pupils were very fond of poetical recitations, he recited a pretty little ballad of Sir Walter Scott's, and thus concluded what was a very pleasant interview for all parties.

"Mr. Emerson will lecture tomorrow night. His subject is quaintly named by himself, 'Clubs, or Conversation.'"

The advance notice of the lecture in the *Daily State Sentinel*, an Indianapolis paper, Tuesday morning, January 27, 1863, read: "Lecture Tonight. Ralph Waldo Emerson lectures tonight at Masonic Hall. The subject is 'Clubs or Conversation.' we do not know what that means, for unlike our legislature, Mr. Emerson is not bound, as far as we know, to express the subject matter in the title of his bill of fare. We are satisfied, however, that the lecture will be one of interest. Mr. Emerson ranks high as a writer and a lecturer, and he has the power to entertain and instruct a cultivated audience. The lecture commences at 7 o'clock."

The *Indianapolis Journal*, Tuesday, January 27, 1863, carried the following announcement: "The Lecture. We need hardly remind our readers that tonight at Masonic Hall, Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the profoundest thinkers and ablest essayists of the present age, will lecture before the Young Men's Christian Association. It is not often that we get sight or hearing of so truly intellectual a man, and we are confident the opportunity will not be lost."

Wednesday, January 28, 1863, the *Indianapolis Journal* reported: "Mr. Emerson's Lecture. Probably a better night might have brought out a larger crowd to hear Mr. Emerson's lecture at Masonic Hall last night, before the Young Men's Christian Association, but it could hardly have brought out a more appreciative one. The subject was 'Clubs, or Conversation', a title which, as the lecture progressed, was found to be as expressive as before it appeared obscure. Its purpose was to show what conversation is, and its value in teaching men or bringing out their characters, and the importance of 'clubs', or social gatherings, properly applied and regulated,
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to produce and cultivate genuine conversation. We have not
space to notice its points, but we may say it was full both of
sound philosophy or development of causes, and of shrewd
observation of facts to deduce causes from. And it overflowed
with anecdote and erudition. Probably no other living man
could bring so completely together such widely scattered
elements of opinion and instruction. He had anecdotes and
maxims from the Greeks, legends from the Scandinavians,
bon-mots from the French, repartees from the English, and
facts from everywhere, and all worked into a solid and
symmetrical fabric. His style of delivery is perfectly adapted
to his style of oratory. Both are unlike anybody else's, full
of quaint jerks and turns of thought, and as quaint halts and
modulations of speech, yet both strong, direct, and devoid of
the slightest suggestion of a desire to let either help the other
by any grace of ornament or oratory. The delivery simply
gets out the idea, and don't try to keep it on its feet after-
wards, and the idea takes no pains to shape itself so as to
let the delivery have a graceful task of it. He has a fashion
of seeming to forget the last word or two, always significant,
and, as in an air on a violin, the keynotes, of a sentence, and
stumbling upon them unexpectedly with an effort that the
most elaborate declamation could not produce. This is mani-
festly not a trick of the rostrum, but the necessary halting
of the speech to let the idea catch up with it. An illustration
may not be out of place. Speaking of the bringing out of one
thought by another in conversation, a corresponding or related
thought, as one story suggests another like it, he said:
'Thoughts always go in pairs. One fact recalls another, how-
ever distant in time or different in circumstances the knowl-
edge of it may have been acquired. Related thoughts will
come together. Thoughts go in pairs. And this is the reason,
probably, why, when a man tells a good story he invariably'—
hesitating as if he had forgotten what to say—'tells it again.'
We wish we had space to notice the lecture at greater length,
but we have not, and must reluctantly drop the subject."
The Indianapolis Daily Gazette, Wednesday, January 28,
1863, said, of this same lecture: "The Lecture.—Mr. Emerson
the Boston savant lectured to a good house, an intelligent, and
appreciative, audience last night, and, we believe, made a
decided impression upon the minds of his auditors of his
character as an eminent literary man, his peculiar style of
oratory and expression. His subject, 'Clubs, or Conversation,' was elucidated and illustrated in a striking manner, turning all subjects for the time, like the waters of a mill race, to bear upon the one, and keep the whole moving. Anecdotes, maxims and queer illustrations, sparkled out here and there like stars in a clear firmament, illuminating the discourse and rendering it more interesting and entertaining. The value of clubs for the purpose of providing the necessity, and developing a healthy flow of Conversation, was impressed upon all, and we trust its effect will not be allowed to pass away unnoticed or unimproved. We need clubs, social societies for mutual improvement—not mutual admiration societies—which would conduce to the enjoyment and enlightenment of their patrons, and now we need them most.

"If we were to make objections to Mr. Emerson's style or manner of lecturing, we should say his lecture was too much like a book, his delivery not bold and full enough to enable his hearers to take in every sentiment and digest it before another of equal or greater importance is uttered. A reading would be more satisfactory than a hearing, as one could then, at his leisure, stop to dissect an idea before proceeding; he could see the word or name, for instance, of a Scandinavian deity, or mundane celebrity, which is not heard very often, and appreciate the application or connection. It keeps one thinking rapidly, all the time, to retain all the lecturer says, or like the child stringing beads, with no knot in her thread, the ideas drop off as fast as they are run on. A better selection of a subject could have been made for this time and latitude; one of more vital importance. But we are glad of having an opportunity to see Mr. Emerson, and hear him upon any subject."

Emerson's next address in Indianapolis was delivered on Tuesday evening, February 13, 1866. His subject was "Social Aims of America."

The Indianapolis Daily Gazette, February 13, 1866, announced this lecture: "The Lecture Tonight.—Masonic Hall will contain an audience to night composed—be they many or few—of the intelligent and intellectual of our community. It is not everybody that can appreciate Mr. Emerson—even of those who are in the habit of attending popular lectures. But in a city as large as this, there ought to be enough to furnish a good sized audience at least. Mr. Emerson is beyond all ques-
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tion the most original and profound thinker in America, as well as one of the best and most interesting lecturers. Every sentence he utters is laden with thought and makes the listener think also. We prefer him to any man we ever heard, as a lecturer, and do hope that our citizens will turn out this evening, and give him a good audience. Those who have ever heard Mr. Emerson of course need no urging to do so. To those who never have heard him, we say—go by all means, if you would hear the greatest lecturer and most profound man of the age. Our word for it you will be pleased and rightly paid for the cost and time. Subject—The Social Aims of America—this evening at Masonic Hall.”

The following appeared in the Indianapolis Daily Herald, February 13, 1866: “Emerson’s lecture To-night, . . . Our citizens must not forget the opportunity of hearing the lecture this evening of this distinguished American poet and popular writer. He is classed as one of the most prominent lecturers of the age, and to those that admire the beautiful in thought and the elegant in ideal, should not fail to hear his choicest and richest productions of his gifted genius, styled ‘Social Aims in America’.”

The Indianapolis Daily Gazette, Wednesday, February 14, 1866, reported: “Mr. Emerson’s Lecture.—The audience to hear Mr. Emerson’s lecture last evening was fair—the lecture barely so. We were disappointed in our expectations and think the auditors generally were. Mr. Emerson seemed to be ‘out of humor’ from some cause or other, and we don’t blame him. For a man like him to come all the way from Boston to lecture to an Indianapolis audience on manners and good breeding, and to be furnished an old, greasy kitchen table, with a candle box on top of it, for a desk is enough to insult any man. We should have not blamed the lecturer if he had walked down from the platform and refused to speak at all, on seeing such accommodations. This is the second time that speakers have been insulted, and the city disgraced in that way. Mr. Thompson, of England, was compelled to use the same old table and candle box. It is a positive shame and disgrace to the city, and to the proprietors of Masonic Hall, and especially to the Association inviting gentlemen here to lecture to furnish such accommodations in the way of a desk or pulpit! We hope never to see the like again at that place, or, indeed, in the city anywhere. Can
not somebody be induced to procure a decent movable desk for Masonic Hall?"

Apparently there was no further local newspaper coverage of this lecture.