

Preface

“Going West”

Let the old man sleep. His has been a long and unflagging life's work,
And he is tired and toll-worn. And just as the shades of his last, long night
Had begun to deepen the twilight of his life, disaster and sorrow had come
When he needed rather rest and joy to smooth his pathway down to the river.
And so he died just as the day yesterday was done and night hovered with the
Angels that waited for his life and soul to come out to them and fly away.

God bless the old man's memory.

— *Kansas City (Mo.) Times*, 1872

HORACE GREELEY was free at last. The “tribune of the people” had died, his voice now silenced by a higher power. Ordinary citizens grieved. The most widely known editor in America had gone, leaving an empty place at the table in millions of homes. Through his newspaper, “Uncle Horace” did many Americans’ thinking for them for two dollars a year, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote. He spoke their language and shared their joys and sorrows. His vivid and slang-ridden prose helped transform the liberty of some into freedom for all. Now, in the language of Elizabethan English and American frontier slang, Horace Greeley had finally “gone West.”

Greeley had been a famous and visible figure in New York life, in large measure because of his recognizable, odd appearance. He stood nearly six feet tall, well above average, but was stooped from sitting at a desk and reading. His clothes were rustic and out of place in the city—an old white Irish linen coat (purchased from an Irish immigrant in New York for twenty dollars), large boots, baggy black pantaloons. He never did learn to tie a cravat. He wore thick wire-rimmed glasses and

had a pink baby face, sometimes framed with a fringe beard or throat whiskers.

The editor of the *New York Tribune* died at 6:50 p.m. on Friday, November 29, 1872, at the home, and private asylum, of Dr. George S. Choate. Choate was a friend and neighbor who lived a few miles away from the Greeley farm in Chappaqua, north of New York City. For days the dying editor lay in a kind of "acute mania." He broke a watch at one point and threw a kerosene lamp on the floor. On occasion, he would blurt out utterances and prayers: "I know that my redeemer liveth," then later "I died before I was born," and finally, around 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, "It is done." At the end, only his daughter Ida was present. The doctors said he died of "brain fever."¹

On Saturday, Greeley's body was brought down to New York City by train from Chappaqua to the home of Samuel Sinclair at 69 West 45th Street in the city, then displayed in a black walnut casket lined with white satin and covered with black cloth. In death as in life, his dress was formal but ordinary—black pantaloons, black dress coat, a velvet vest.

New York City in 1872 was a study in contrasts. Its population was approaching one million people. Greeley's new eleven-story Tribune Tower—the highest in New York City—was beginning to rise at the corner of Nassau and Spruce Streets, a massive brick-and-granite structure two years away from completion. Macy's, B. Altman's, Tiffany's, and F.A.O. Schwartz ran prosperous new retail businesses. New York City bonds were selling internationally on the markets of London, Paris, and Frankfurt. The Grand Central Depot, opened a year earlier, welcomed and dispatched over one hundred trains every day. Contractors were building new paved streets and avenues, new sewer, water, and gas pipelines, new buildings with newfangled elevators. The Third Avenue horse cars carried more than sixty commuters in each car at rush hour. Staten Island was becoming a new suburb, rather than a malaria-infested and inaccessible expanse. There were more than one thousand factories in Brooklyn alone. A new Brooklyn Bridge was under construction over the East River.²

In contrast, there were the rotting tenements and slums of the city, a warren of saloons and shanties from which many New Yorkers regularly averted their eyes, ears, and noses. Immigrants from Europe continued to pour into town, struggling to find a place to live and work. The New York Elevated Railroad, still an experiment, was both dirty

and noisy. Some eighty “concert saloons” plied their trade—liquor and prostitution—especially in the new “Tenderloin District.” When the poor and the homeless voted, they voted Democrat. The Republican Party fought a rearguard minority action against William “Boss” Tweed and Tammany Hall, who controlled City Hall, as well as the New York State Assembly and State Senate up the Hudson River in Albany. Corrupt politicians and contractors amassed fortunes, while raising the prices for land and rent. There were twice as many lawyers as two decades earlier.

On the day following Greeley’s death, even the arch-rival *New York Times* paid grudging tribute to the editor. Without him, wrote the *Times*, his beloved *Tribune* was an “empty shell.” Perhaps Greeley had died after an exhausting campaign for the presidency against U. S. Grant. Or perhaps the death of his wife, Molly, a few weeks earlier had simply overwhelmed him. Greeley was a man of odd styles with an “almost violent energy of mind” who was more of a champion than a leader. Yet millions knew his name and hundreds of thousands considered Uncle Horace another member of the family whose opinions they valued. He was the last of a breed of editors, great men who developed an enormous public following. But newspapers were now big business, not personal fiefdoms. His like would not be seen again.³

In Washington, the U.S. Senate opened its session on Monday, only to suspend deliberations until Thursday so that Senators who wished could attend the Greeley funeral. The House of Representatives paused for prayers and a moment of silence in Greeley’s honor. Word was already out that the President and Vice President of the United States would be in New York City for the funeral.

On Tuesday, December 3, the citizens of New York City paid their respect as the body of Horace Greeley lay in state at City Hall. “All day and far into the night,” wrote the *Tribune*, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, fathers with their little children, maimed soldiers on crutches, generals, merchants, lawyers, beggars, came to take a last look at his kind face.” A double line stretched four blocks north from 10:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night. Democratic Party leader Samuel J. Tilden was there, along with Albany political boss Thurlow Weed, Greeley’s former Whig mentor and ally, then his Republican enemy and rival, now simply another silent man in tears.⁴

The newly elected mayor of New York City, William Havemeyer, came by and paid his respects. Members of the city’s Common Council

—Greeley called them the “Forty Thieves”—arrived. So did Republicans and Democrats of all shapes and sizes, and just plain citizens—businessmen, bankers, factory owners, Germans and Irish, white and black, and Civil War veterans of all conditions.

But the most moving sight came after 6:00 p.m. with the arrival of thousands of ordinary working men and women, including the “colored population” of the city, many of them former slaves. They included young newsboys who delivered the *Tribune* across Gotham. The newspapers estimated that three thousand people every hour, perhaps forty or fifty thousand in all, came by to pay their respect and say their farewells to Uncle Horace.

On Wednesday, Greeley’s funeral suited a president more than a simple freeman.⁵ The weather was cold and gray, homes and shops draped in mourning black, offices closed and shuttered. Flags flew at half-mast. Crowds lined the avenues as many people wept openly.

President Grant had only recently defeated Greeley in the election for the presidency of the United States, and came up from Washington by train to attend the services. He can hardly have been overjoyed at honoring the candidate who had so recently charged him and his administration with corruption, bribery, and general criminal activity. But Grant had won, and decisively so.

Republican politicians abounded. Vice President Schuyler Colfax, Greeley’s old friend and editor from Indiana, later a U.S. Congressman and Speaker of the House of Representatives, was in attendance. Grant had just dumped Colfax from the ticket in favor of the Vice President elect, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, a former Natick shoemaker and radical republican friend of Greeley. The Chief Justice of the United States, Salmon P. Chase, was there. So were two cabinet members, Secretary of War William W. Belknap and former Secretary of State Elihu Washburne. Both New York Senators were there, along with the governors of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

Whitelaw Reid, Greeley’s editorial successor, and the entire *Tribune* staff attended the funeral as a group. R. M. Hoe, the inventor of the high-speed rotary press, was there. So was the rest of the New York newspaper world.

Funeral services were held at the Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity at Fifth Avenue and 45th Street. Here Greeley’s own

pew was strewn with camelias. The pew would remain vacant for the next thirty days out of respect for the deceased. Floral wreaths, like many banners across the city, carried his legendary last words—"I know that my Redeemer liveth" and "It is Done." "There could have been no political triumph for Horace Greeley living like this social triumph of Horace Greeley dead," wrote the *Tribune*. The *Times* agreed: "Seldom has an eminent man received greater proofs of the respect in which he was held by his fellow citizens." The packed church held only 1,500 people. Consequently, a huge crowd gathered in the streets outside the church, at times nearly overwhelming the police.

The service was brief and simple. The well-known minister Henry Ward Beecher, a close friend of Greeley, spoke of the dead man's lifelong crusade on behalf of the less fortunate. "He was feet for the lame," said Beecher, "he was tongue for the dumb; he was an eye for the blind; and had a heart for those who had none to sympathize with them." Greeley's own Universalist preacher, Edwin Chapin, noted that the "poor man's friend" spent his life showing that mercy could be greater than justice by his own example, "the magnetism of simple goodness." Beecher spoke to the heart, said one observer, and Chapin to the mind. Both were eloquent.

After the services, six men carried Greeley's coffin to a waiting hearse. At 1:15 p.m., the funeral procession—including 125 carriages, two abreast—wound its way by carriage and on foot to the Battery, then by ferry through the cold afternoon to Greenwood Cemetery on Gowanus Heights in Brooklyn. Greenwood was a sprawling sylvan meadow of curving paths, statues, iron railings, and picnic sites that for several decades served New York as a "romantic suburb for the deceased" and a Sunday afternoon escape from the cares of urban life. Greeley loved the place. Perhaps it reminded him of the farm life he had once escaped and later romanticized. Now it was his eternal home.

By the time the funeral cortege arrived at Greenwood, it was dusk. At the Greeley family vault on Locust Hill, his deceased wife and three children awaited his coming. Police had to clear a path through the crowd to get to the tomb. There were a few prayers. Then his daughters Ida and Gabrielle placed flowers on the coffin. That was the end.

Greeley's passing was an American, as much as a New York,

moment of grief. In 1869, *Harper's Weekly* called Greeley "the most perfect Yankee the country has ever produced." He "obeyed his impulses" and said what he thought. He could be crude, peevish, intellectual, childish, headstrong, moody, irascible, impractical, and absent-minded. But he was also humane, optimistic, principled, sincere, kind, generous, and physically fearless. He was a crusader for moral reform. At his *Tribune* office, Greeley was accessible to virtually anyone at any time, to the consternation of his staff. He worked endlessly and long hours. He rose early and slept little. He generally eschewed any stimulants, such as tea or coffee. He never drank alcoholic beverages (he was a lifelong temperance man). He could talk at length about virtually any subject. But he could also listen well.

Greeley was no orator. When he spoke—which was often—he had a high, somewhat squeaky voice. People loved to listen to him talk—a plain man reading and speaking plain sense to plain men, as his British biographer James Parton put it in 1855. But print was Greeley's true medium. When he wrote, he made the language sing for ordinary Americans, writing a colloquial prose they could easily understand. And the audience for his written words was enormous and attentive.⁶

But behind appearances lay a giant mind and heart. From his youth, Greeley was an omnivorous reader with a photographic memory. He read the poetry of Lord Byron and Robert Burns, the essays of Robert Browning and Thomas Carlyle, the Bible and Shakespeare, the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Universalist writings of Hosea Ballou. To his contemporaries, he seemed to read and retain everything, from poems to political speeches and voting statistics. He was also a polymath, who wanted to know and do everything. Some found him busy but not wise, humane but acerbic, sincere but stubborn, and a man of ideas but not thoughts. He had few friends and no cronies, and hated public dinners and parties. But he loved jokes and songs (he wanted to write a "Songbook for the People" but never did), told great stories, and held tenacious opinions on all subjects.

Greeley was a workaholic. He was always in a hurry and rarely seemed to have had any rest or sleep. He usually showed up at the *Tribune* offices between noon and 1:00 p.m., his pockets stuffed with the morning newspapers, many of which he had already read. He rarely greeted anyone, but went immediately to his roll-top desk. Here he opened and answered numerous letters. He then began reading

drafts of the next day's articles before they went to press, a merciless editor, especially critical of typographical errors of any kind. His own prose was clear and crisp, usually sixteen words to a line as opposed to the usual twelve. Around 4 or 5:00 p.m., he went out to dinner at a nearby restaurant, usually returning to the office and staying well into the evening. "He worked," recalled one close friend, "because he could not help it."⁷

"Horace Greeley was a great man," wrote his friend James Gilmore, another editor, "—undisciplined, ill-regulated, but great, and measured by his influence upon his time, and on the upward progress of the American people, it may be questioned if this country has produced any greater, excepting Benjamin Franklin."⁸

His critics responded in kind. William Henry Seward, for example, considered Greeley's habits and eccentricities annoying: "What can you do with a man of sixty ideas, and every one of the sixty an impracticable crochet?" That legendary scribbler of New York happenings, diarist George Templeton Strong, wrote in his diary the day after Greeley died, "Had God granted him a little plain practical sense, Horace Greeley would have been a great man."⁹

But the traditional picture of Greeley the eccentric and impractical editor and talker needs revision. As at least a few contemporaries recognized, Greeley was a very consistent, if unsystematic, thinker with a lifelong and passionate commitment to the cause of freedom and reform. He readily imbibed new ideas. But he was not really inconsistent. In the words of a modern scholar, Greeley was a kind of "one-man switchboard for the international cause of 'Reform'" who tried to "accommodate intellectually the contradictions inherent in the many diverse reform movements of the time."¹⁰

Horace Greeley was a trans-Atlantic republican who inherited the Stoic, Christian, and Roman republican virtues of the western tradition. Like the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, Greeley believed in the power of reason, justice, hard work, kindness, generosity, temperance, self-control, and universal brotherhood. Like the early Christians, he believed in the importance of love, the Word, humility, conscience, liberty, moral reform, and universal salvation. And like the Roman republicans, he believed in civic virtue, citizenship, and political participation by the people.

In an age of liberal nationalism and national liberalism, Horace Greeley helped fuel the Second American Revolution, transforming

the liberty of the first American Revolution into the freedom and equality forged in the fires of Civil War. He did this under the influence of the radical republicans of 1830 and 1848 in Europe who found their way to America, and often to the columns of the *Tribune*. American freedom was the moral and political heart of Horace Greeley's words and actions. So was his form of Christianity, Universalism. "He was for freedom in the broadest sense," recalled his friend Beman Brockway, "freedom from everything tending to fetter and debase."¹¹ He was the enemy of human slavery in the South and wage slavery in the North. "No man ever lived," read the Syracuse, New York, resolution in Greeley's honor after his death, "who had so large a share in securing the elevation of the thought of America to liberty and freedom as Horace Greeley."¹²

Greeley himself never wrote a great book on freedom or anything else. But his life and work epitomized the search for American freedom. In an unpublished note he wrote toward the end of his life, Greeley scribbled, "Political Freedom too, that priceless boon to those fitted to enjoy it, that rough but never stagnant school to those as yet unequal to its exalted requirements—we cannot be too thankful for its manifold blessings. Where each is a sharer in the National Sovereignty, there will be many monarchs without majesty, many rulers without capacity; but shall not Liberty teach even the lowest dignity and the most sordid magnanimity?" "Let us resolve," he added, "never to be unfaithful to Freedom and our Country."¹³

American freedom was, for Horace Greeley, a universal divine mission. "Either God rules the world," Greeley wrote a friend in 1872, "or he does not. I believe he does."¹⁴