



FOREWORD

The Civil War was the event that most shaped America in the nineteenth century. Russell Herman Conwell consistently spoke of the war as the pivotal happening in his own life. The war as his most formative experience must surely have helped influence his “Acres of Diamonds” speech: the sectional struggle involved the United States’s dramatic discovery of myriad diamonds of courage, resourcefulness, adaptability, and capacity to live up to its highest potential, on the battlefields in its own backyard.

Conwell’s best-known version of how the Civil



War most specifically influenced him is the story of Johnny Ring. Ring as an orderly to Captain Conwell of Company D, 2nd Massachusetts Regiment of Heavy Artillery, retrieves the captain's sword after it is left behind in a retreat from a surprise attack at Newport on the Neuse River near New Bern, North Carolina. In the process, Ring is mortally wounded. Conwell, though raised in a devoutly Methodist environment, grew up and went through Yale College indifferent to religion, while Johnny Ring was a faithful Christian. Ring's dying, in effect for Conwell's sake, and Conwell's own subsequent precarious recovery from a wound suffered in the battle of Kenesaw Mountain, Georgia, produced an epiphany in which Conwell decided he must live for the devout Ring as well as for himself. The decision led to Conwell's career as a Baptist minister and to "Acres of Diamonds."

It is unfortunate that there has been found no convincing evidence even of the existence of a



Johnny Ring who was with Conwell, or of Conwell's presence at Kenesaw Mountain, let alone of his being wounded there. Indeed, Conwell claimed to have ended the Civil War as a lieutenant colonel, so appointed by Major General James B. McPherson to his staff; but there is no written record of that either. McPherson was killed in the battle of Atlanta on July 22, 1864, and thus became unavailable to confirm Conwell's story. The record shows instead that Captain Conwell was dismissed from the service for deserting his post under attack.

The reader by now will have concluded correctly that, alas, Russell Conwell, the founder of Temple University and the more-than-six-thousand-times deliverer of the inspirational "Acres of Diamonds" address, was more than a little humbug. But he was nevertheless likable, charismatic, and eventually a powerful force for good. Perhaps his less appealing qualities should not be altogether



surprising. They signify that Conwell was thoroughly a man of the exuberant, hard-driving but often morally dubious Gilded Age of American business, industrial, urban, and sometimes religious expansiveness after the Civil War, inspired in part by the war's message to the victorious North that almost any triumph might be possible. Whatever the truth about Conwell's war experiences, he emerged evidently exuberant himself over the possibilities for national enrichment revealed by the immense resources that began to be tapped during the war, the acres of diamonds in every American community's own backyard.

Conwell's famous speech, first published by the J.Y. Huber Company of Philadelphia in 1890, can easily be read as a Gilded Age manifesto, a call to all his listeners and readers to try to cash in on the chances for wealth created by the burgeoning national economy, just as the peasant from what is now Pakistan did with his discovery of diamonds



in the legend from which Conwell drew. There is more to “Acres of Diamonds” than that, however, just as there was more to Russell Conwell than his sometimes reckless self-advertisement.

The diamonds he had in mind were all the possibilities implicit in human life. His Baptist ministry carrying him in 1881 to Grace Baptist Church in North Philadelphia, he used the financial opportunities of the Gilded Age to build by 1891 on the southeast corner of Broad and Berks Streets an extraordinarily large and imposing church structure, the Baptist Temple. But the purpose of the Temple was through the facilities of the building and Conwell’s goodwill to reach out to all of the peoples of North Philadelphia, many of them poor and many of them recent immigrants, to help them tap their individual potentials for growth. Conwell’s institutional church offered recreation, social life, economic assistance, and instructional courses, all with increasing emphasis



on education, the most valuable of all aids to growth, with study in what evolved into Temple University in the 1880s even before the Baptist Temple was completed.

Through this institutional church and his university, and through the underlying message of “Acres of Diamonds,” Conwell aimed to transcend the Gilded Age’s mere gospel of wealth with a larger message combining the American quest for social and economic mobility with a sense of social responsibility, all infused with Christianity, though Conwell kept his church and his university separate. He feared that the rich of the Gilded Age were trying to fashion themselves into a hereditary aristocracy. He hoped to democratize the aspirations of the age. “Acres of Diamonds” should be read with Conwell’s complex, even to a degree contradictory, motivations in mind.

Russell F. Weigley



INTRODUCTION

The publication of this new edition of Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" is an important occasion for Temple University Press and for Temple University. For the Press, this new edition makes available to another generation of readers Rev. Conwell's most famous remarks and provides a glimpse of his thinking. For the university, this new edition renews our acquaintance with the remarkable founder of this institution and creates an opportunity for us to think again about Temple's evolution through the years.

Russell Conwell's life itself was a remarkable



voyage. Born in western Massachusetts on February 15, 1843, to a poor family, he waited tables, taught music, and worked at whatever other odd jobs came along to carry himself through Wilbraham Academy and Yale University. His college education was interrupted by his service in the Civil War, where he rose to captain in the Massachusetts Heavy Artillery. After the war, Conwell attended Albany Law School. While studying law, he worked as a reporter on papers in Boston and New York. He was assigned by the Boston Traveler to an around-the-world trip whose purpose is no longer known but that greatly influenced Conwell's thinking. While practicing law in Boston, he became a formidable orator. His teaching of a Bible class at Tremont Temple led him to study for the ministry at Newton Theological Seminary and eventually to work as a clergyman.

In 1882, Conwell began his ministry in Philadelphia at a church that, by legend, had a small



congregation and was struggling. Under Conwell's leadership, the congregation grew rapidly and in 1889 built the Baptist Temple at Broad Street and Berks, which could accommodate more than two thousand worshipers and still stands today. Although some teaching of religious classes apparently began in 1884, a date generally marked as the founding of Temple University, a class taught by Conwell in 1887 for a church deacon and six other young workingmen who aspired to the clergy established what would become a collegiate program of instruction. In 1888, a state charter was issued to Temple College for "the support of an educational institution intended primarily for the benefit of workingmen." But from the beginning, the college declared itself "free to workingmen and women." At least from the date of the Charter, the college was entirely nonsectarian, as it has remained to the present time. In 1891, the Charter was amended to broaden the college's mission to



provide education “for young men and women desirous of attending the same.” The first degrees were awarded in 1892, and there were four women among the eighteen graduates. It appears that from the earliest years African Americans enrolled in the college, but there were no records or photographic yearbooks in the early decades to indicate the race of students. It is known, however, that in 1912 a black woman graduated from the Medical College.

At Russell Conwell’s death on December 6, 1925, at the age of eighty-two, Temple, which had been renamed Temple University in recognition of the growth of the instructional program, enrolled approximately ten thousand students in eight colleges and schools. Rev. Conwell established a secure base on which subsequent generations have built a university that now enrolls more than thirty thousand students in seventeen schools and colleges. At the core of the main campus remain three of the original buildings—the Baptist



Temple, College Hall (originally a classroom building), and Sullivan Hall (originally a library).

Through several generations of retelling at Temple, the original character of “Acres of Diamonds” has largely been lost. The speech is a paean to the capitalist vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conwell’s message, recurring again and again in his vignettes and examples, is that persons who use their intelligence and work hard can find opportunities in their own backyard to become wealthy. Conwell’s speech praises Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, A. T. Stewart, John Jacob Astor, and others who amassed enormous wealth; and it is openly scornful of those, including the press, who heap criticism on the capitalist class and of labor unions for attempting to equalize the earnings of the diligent and the indolent. Reading “Acres of Diamonds” today can therefore be jarring.

Through the history of Temple University, the



phrase “acres of diamonds” has taken on a unique metaphorical meaning. The “acres of diamonds” found in the institution’s “backyard” have become the worthy and talented students of modest means in the Philadelphia region for whom Temple University has striven to provide an education. There are scant references in Conwell’s speech to Temple University, and none of them suggests a higher education parallel to the capitalist stories illustrating opportunities for wealth—acres of diamonds—in one’s own backyard.

Professor Weigley’s sometimes iconoclastic introduction to this volume raises questions about Conwell’s telling of his own history. A reading of “Acres of Diamonds” will raise questions about whether Conwell ever really intended it as a mission statement for Temple University. But as Professor Weigley concedes, Russell Conwell was in the end a “likable, charismatic, and eventually powerful force for good.” The diamonds of



Conwell's famous speech, although it is explicitly a Gilded Age capitalist manifesto, are metaphorically "all the possibilities implicit in human life." And it is scarcely a stretch to see in Conwell's speech a manifesto for the education of students in Temple's own backyard, its acres of diamonds waiting to be found. Whether or not Conwell had that in mind, that is what "acres of diamonds" has come to mean for the university that Conwell built and for the generations of students—including 215,000 living alumni as this is written—who have attended Temple in the eleven and a half decades since Conwell offered his first collegiate class to Charles Davies and six other young workingmen.

David Adamany