

Albert Pike - Man of Fire

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I'd like you to meet a friend. His name is Albert Pike, and he knew how to live!

Generally, people seem to react to Albert Pike in one of three ways. One group (which usually has not read Pike) says "Ah, Pike!" and then assumes a pose of silent rapture, supposedly at Pike's overwhelming greatness but actually so no one can ask them anything about him.

The second, larger group, says, "Uck, Pike!" and then stomps off. They haven't read Pike either, but everyone's told them he's too hard to understand, so why try?

The third group has read Pike, and they say, "Wow! What a man!"

Albert Pike suffers from too much plaster. He's been cast as a plaster saint – the unapproachable intellectual giant who created the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry and its present form in the Southern Jurisdiction, USA, the mind so vast as to be incomprehensible. Busts in bronze or marble (as well as plaster) portray him as the patriarch, penetrating of eye and stern of brow

whom one cannot understand, but can only admire in awe-struck wonder. Or sneer at in contempt.

There was much of the patriarch in Pike, although less than subsequent generations have invested there. But there was far more than patriarch, far more than marble or bronze or plaster. There was fire.

The Pike we need to know better is not the patriarch but the pioneer, the friend, the crusader for justice for Native Americans (well liked enough that one tribe paid him the almost unheard of honor of making him an honorary Chief), the practical joker, the poet, the teacher, the cook, the social lion, the reformer, the explorer referred to by the historian Grant Foreman as "one of the most remarkable and interesting characters in the annals of the Southwest" – we need to know the man.

And man he was! He was dashing and handsome, and a genuine heartbreaker in his earlier years.

He was a powerful man, six feet and two inches tall, finely formed, with dark eyes and fair skin, fleet of foot and sure of shot, able to endure hardship, greatly admired by the Indians.

He was known as the best shot in town. His laugh was so famous it was written about in the social columns of the Washington, D.C., newspapers. He always had a new joke or story to tell his friends. He was considered one of the best dancers in the capital, and society hostesses fought to get him as a guest at their parties. If General Pike were there, the party was sure to be a success.

He wore his hair long, when it was not the fashion, and it gave him an extra air of the exotic. He hardly needed it – he was naturally an exotic in almost every sense. He was an accomplished violinist, and he sang in a beautiful voice – and it's quite possible that not all the songs were for mixed company.

He organized hunting and camping parties lasting many days, and served as the cook for the expeditions (he was famous for his stews of game and vegetables). Indeed, the leaders of Washington fought to be included as guests on those trips.

He made and lost fortunes. The story is told that he literally partied away a large sum of money on a steamer trip up the river from New Orleans to Little Rock. Allsopp suggests that, even if the story is apocryphal, the spirit of it is true.

He had hundreds of devoted friends. Once, while he was away from Washington, an erroneous report of his death reached the city. A great wake had been planned, and, when a very much alive Albert Pike suddenly appeared in Washington, D.C., his friends decided to go ahead with the wake anyhow. Rather like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Pike got a chance not only to observe but to participate in his own obsequies. The event, recorded in the press, nearly turned into a riot. Some of his friends tried to match him drink for drink, and that was a mistake.

But, with all that, he was a student. He lived to learn and loved to share what he had learned. His friend, Thomas Hatch, wrote of Pike shortly after his death:

He would spread out the stores of his knowledge with such infinite tact and grace that the ignorant man would not feel oppressed by the contrast between them, and the learned would listen to him, wondering at his wisdom.

Education was, for Pike, a life-long process. He taught himself languages, history, philosophy, theology, and law. His ability in the law was sound enough for him to become one of the best-known lawyers in the South and to serve as a Justice of the Supreme Court of Arkansas during the Confederacy. On March 9, 1849, he was admitted, with Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin, to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. He also was an educator, and in 1853, he was elected President of the Board of Trustees of St. John's College, of Little Rock. Nor did Pike's talents dull with age. As Moore points out:

After he was seventy years of age, he learned the Sanscrit language and translated from it into English the Veda, that source of the "World-Old" Philosophy of the Hindoos [Hindus].

The sheer excitement of information breaks out again and again in Pike's writing.

He wrote extremely well indeed. The contemporary Canadian scholar Wallace McLeod, writes of him:

He had a sound instinct for right and wrong, and (in Coil's words) "a profound belief in an all-wise, moral, and beneficent God " And, oh, he could write! He could recognize essential truths on which all good men agree, and express them clearly in such a way that they sound fresh, compelling, and even inspiring; you find yourself listening, and inwardly nodding your head.

He loved good food, good company, travel, justice, the feel of a quill pen in his hand, and, perhaps above all, his pipe.

Critics who don't know Pike have saddled him with a reputation as an ivory-towered intellect, remote from and indifferent to the "real world." The image fits well with the plaster patriarch, but it doesn't fit reality. There are few ivory towers on the battlefield, and Pike was a general. Ivory towers were even rarer on the frontier where a man ate only if he could hunt his dinner, where he was at constant risk of death from bandits and marauders, where there was often the danger of dying of thirst in the desert or freezing in a blizzard, and where losing one's horse could mean a 500-mile trek to the nearest outpost. All those things happened to Pike. As Admiral Winfield Scott Schley, wrote:

There was little known of the vast regions lying West of the great Mississippi River. They were covered with primeval forests, arid plains and forbidding mountain ranges, over which wild animals roamed to the menace of life and limb of anyone whose hardihood these venturesome fastnesses impenetrable wildernesses I attracted. New Mexico at that period (1831) was far

beyond the frontier of our country and between the two lay a veritable "Terra Incognita" into which few ventured with any hope of return.

Pike's thoughtfulness and introspection did not come from ease and comfort. As he wrote:

I have acquired, by wild and desolate life, a habit of looking steadily in upon my own mind, and of fathoming its resources; and perhaps solitude has been a creator of egotism.

Not egotism, exactly; but since Pike arrived at a position only after considerable thought, he was not easily swayed. He was always willing to discuss his opinions, however, and could be convinced, with sufficient evidence, when he was in error.

So who was this man?

As a teacher, he commanded an immense knowledge of both classical literature and history. As a lawyer, he offered such legal expertise and personal honesty that he became one of the most respected counsels of mid-19th-century America. As a pioneer, he traveled extensively and recorded his impressions vividly. As a general, he was a leader. As a writer and poet, he transformed the literature of our Scottish Rite.

Truly, Albert Pike was a multidimensional man. His special genius was the ability to infuse every endeavor with absolute commitment. He had faith in himself and, as importantly, in America. Love of country motivated him and freedom was his unswerving guide.

So wrote C. Fred Kleinknecht, in 1986. Similarly, near the beginning of this century, Fred Allsopp wrote:

When the mass of the output of the brain of this man Pike is considered, is it any wonder that Judge John Hallum exclaimed that his labors equalled Bonaparte's in another field? Think of his activities! He performed as much creative writing as most authors do who devote their lives to literature. Yet he served altogether perhaps three-fourths of the mature years of his life on the editorial tripod, in the field as a soldier, as a lawyer at the bar, and as Grand Commander of the Supreme Council, Southern Jurisdiction, of the Scottish Rite – and excelled in every line of endeavor.

He was all that, and he was more. He was a profound student of philosophy – who loved the sight of a pretty face, a well-prepared meal, and a belly laugh. He was the principal expounder of the Scottish Rite for the Southern Jurisdiction – who got fired from a teaching job for "playing the fiddle on Sunday," ate horse meat when starving in the prairie, wrote satiric verse, and provided the entertainment at his own, premature, wake. He was a great lover of peace and supporter of the Constitution – who was a General for the South in the Civil War and fought in the last duel ever held in Arkansas. He was a lover of nature and beauty and wilderness – who was one of the first, if not the first, to suggest a railroad linking the East and West coasts and who tried to convince the South to industrialize.

He was, in short, a man of great imagination, daring, creativity, and determination who never lost his love of a practical joke.

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