

Joel Roberts Poinsett:

The Man Behind The Flower

By Brother Edward N. Thompson

Each year the Christmas season is brightened by the poinsettia which has become the traditional Christmas flower. It is named for the American statesman who introduced it to this country from its native Mexico. The story behind this man who gave a lifetime of service to his country and to Freemasonry has been neglected while that of others who have accomplished far less is familiar to all. This, then, is the story of Joel Roberts Poinsett.

With the sounds of the American Revolution round about him, he was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on March 2, 1779, of wealthy parents. His father, Dr. Elisha Poinsett, had dressed the wounds of the dying Pulaski at the siege of Savannah. Little is known of his mother.

Poinsett's formal education began in England where the family lived for six years from 1782 until 1788 . After returning to America, he attended a succession of private schools. He is said to have been a good scholar, especially distinguishing himself in languages, both ancient and modern. He became fluent in French, Spanish, Italian, German and Russian which prepared him for the diplomatic career he was to follow.

In October, 1797, determined to follow his father's wishes, Poinsett enrolled in medical school in Edinburgh. After less than a year, he became convinced that medicine was not for him. Enrolling in the Royal Military Academy, Poinsett became fascinated with military maneuvers, the cavalry, the artillery and the art of fortification. He was convinced he should become a professional soldier.

Dr. Poinsett was determined that his son should not shoulder a musket in peace time and persuaded Joel to begin the study of law. After a year of law, he was seized with wanderlust and his formal education was ended.

In 1801, Joel Roberts Poinsett began the travels which were to take him to most of the nations of Europe. Because a wealthy American traveling abroad was a curiosity, he gained admission to the inner-circles of government. He met kings, ministers, financiers – the people that move governments. In France, he met the great Napoleon.

Within twenty-four hours of his arrival in Russia, the American consul, Levett Harris, introduced Poinsett to the Czar. During the three years he was to remain in Russia, the young American was to become a valued friend and advisor of the ruler of the largest nation in the world. So impressed was Czar Alexander with the American that he offered him a commission in the Russian Army. The South Carolinian also attracted the attention of the Czarina through his knowledge of agriculture and of horticulture. Having come from a wealthy family with large landholdings, Poinsett had early developed an interest in these fields which he would maintain throughout his life. He offered suggestions which improved Russian agricultural output.

John Quincy Adams, later to become President of the United States, reported in 1809 while serving as the American minister to Russia, that both the Czar and Czarina had expressed high esteem for Poinsett and had hinted broadly that he should be appointed the American minister to Russia.

There is no doubt that Poinsett's travels had a profound effect upon his political beliefs. As he witnessed the living conditions of the European masses, and especially the serfs in Russia he came to value the new experiment in government on which his own country had embarked.

Poinsett had become an avid nationalist who believed that the system of government conceived by the founding fathers at Philadelphia was the most perfect ever devised. Having seen first hand the suffering of those under other forms of government, he was ready to dedicate his life to his nation's service.

In 1810, within a year of his return to the United States, President James Madison appointed Joel Poinsett as "agent for seamen and commerce" in southern South America. The South Carolinian's travels abroad, his knowledge of Spanish, and his ability to influence others had marked him for a diplomatic career.

In 1809, Napoleon had seized the Spanish royal family and placed his brother, Joseph, on the throne of Spain. Many Spaniards, living in the American colonies, remained loyal to King Ferdinand and formed revolutionary juntas to defend his rights. These soon gave way to movements for independence from Spain. The provisional governments of the Spanish colonies opened their ports to foreign commerce. England which was always looking for new markets (and colonies) supported these governments against Napoleon. Poinsett arrived in Buenos Aires with instructions to combat British influence with the insurgents. By this time, England threatened to annex Spanish colonies in Florida and Cuba. Ironically, Poinsett arrived disguised as an Englishman aboard a British merchant vessel. The American agent was 28 years old.

After observing the situation first hand, he wrote the State Department that the junta in Buenos Aires desired to declare its independence from Spain and urged their support by the United States. He urged that we encourage a federation of southern South America which would counteract Brazil's monarch, who was under British influence. He concluded with this prediction: "All South America will be separated from the parent country. They have crossed the

Rubicon." President Madison responded by appointing Poinsett Consul-general for Buenos Aires, Chile and Peru.

Poinsett had misjudged the situation. The English did not wish to lose the South American trade and wanted the insurgents to stop short of independence. The junta dared not arouse British opposition. Convinced that nothing more could be accomplished, Poinsett sought a more favorable climate. In November, 1811, he crossed the Andes into Chile.

Poinsett was the first accredited agent of a foreign government to reach Chile and he soon won the favor of the ruling junta.

The viceroy of Peru who was the nominal ruler of Chile was loyal to Spain. He had ordered ships dealing with the rebels seized and their cargoes confiscated. Many American ships were among them. Poinsett urged that Chile close its ports to Peru, but the leaders in Santiago felt they did not have the forces to do so. They instead asked for American arms. This was impossible because the United States was now at war with England and these supplies were needed at Home.

In July, 1812, a commission representing the Chilean junta met to draft a declaration of independence from Spain. Forgetting momentarily the neutrality of the United States, Poinsett not only met with the commission; but the meeting was held in his home. He proposed a constitution patterned after our own. When troops of the viceroy of Peru landed in southern Chile, the president of the junta, Don Miguel Carrera, appointed Poinsett, whose military knowledge was highly esteemed, to be his chief military advisor.

The South Carolinian urged an attack on the port of Talcahuano. Peruvian privateers had seized several whaling vessels, mostly from Nantucket, Massachusetts, and were holding their crews captive. The commander was threatening to send them to Lima in chains. The attack was made and the town was captured in three hours. Imagine the surprise of the American sailors when they met their liberator, the American Consul-General. Never before had an official representative of the United States joined rebel forces as an active combatant in a civil war against a government officially recognized by our country.

This was the apex of the independence movement, reinforcements were sent from Peru. The leaders of the junta were captured and imprisoned. Poinsett left for Buenos Aires.

When he returned home, he did not report to the President that he had served with the insurgent army many weeks following the victory at Talcahuano. With full knowledge of Poinsett's activities thus incomplete, Monroe commended him for a job well done.

Returning to Charleston, he became embroiled in South Carolina's politics, being elected to the state legislature for two terms. He actively supported internal improvements. Never one to shun controversy, Poinsett sponsored a bill to limit the importation of slaves into the state. This

action was to make him an arch-enemy of the proslavery faction. Eventually, he would clash with John C. Calhoun, an anti-Mason, and the strongest political force in the state.

It was during this period that Poinsett began what was to become a distinguished Masonic career.

He is recorded as being a past master of both Recovery Lodge, No. 31, Greenville, South Carolina, and of Solomons Lodge, No. 1, in Charleston. In 1821, he was elected Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina. He was unable to serve as Grand Master due to his appointment as Secretary of War in 1841. In 1821 he was elected Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of South Carolina, holding office until 1841. He served as Deputy General Grand High Priest of the General Grand Chapter from 1829-1839. He also introduced Royal Arch Masonry into Mexico.

In 1821, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives. Because of his experience in diplomacy, he was placed on the Foreign Affairs Committee. When the presidential election of 1824 was thrown into the House, he declared that nothing but an act of God could prevent him from voting for Andrew Jackson. John Quincy Adams was elected. On March 7, 1825, Poinsett resigned from Congress to take up his post as the first American Minister to Mexico.

Taking time out from his Congressional duties in 1822, Poinsett had been sent on a semi-official mission to Mexico by President James Monroe. Mexico had gained its independence from Spain and Poinsett was to determine if the U.S. should extend diplomatic recognition to that country. At the completion of the mission, he expressed the belief that Iturbide held the imperial throne against the wishes of the people who were for the establishment of a liberal constitution and a republican form of government.

After his appointment by Adams, Poinsett arrived in Mexico only to find the conservative faction, many of whom favored a monarchy, in charge.

"Poinsett had hardly reached Mexico City when certain members of five newly founded York Rite lodges requested him to obtain for them a charter from the United States ... Many of the members of the new organization were men of political influence. Among them were two members of the cabinet, two senators, several congressmen and such prominent army officers as Guerrero Santa Anna and Zavala. The movement spread like wildfire and in the course of a few months some eighty-two lodges had been organized. Poinsett always insisted that he did not expect the York Masons to depart from their legitimate functions of benevolence and humanitarianism but one finds this difficult to believe. The Scottish Rites were already a political party and the new lodges soon became the nucleus of an opposing political group known as the Yorkistas. After this transformation Poinsett found it expedient to desist from attending their meetings but whether he wished it or not he was forced to depend upon the members of the York lodges for support."

Rightly or wrongly, Poinsett was accused of fomenting revolution. So involved had he become in Mexico's political affairs that as Guadalupe Victoria's term as President neared its close, Nicolas Bravo, Vice-President and Scottish Rite Mason, rose in revolt and issued the Plan de Montano.

"It contained four points: the Congress was to prohibit by law all secret societies; the President's ministers were to be dismissed; Poinsett was to be driven out of Mexico; and the constitution was to be rigidly enforced."

The ensuing conflict was one of the strangest wars ever fought. Two opposing generals, each serving as Grand Master of a Masonic Grand Lodge, were to take arms against brother Masons. Nicolas Bravo was Grand Master of the Escoceses or Scottish Rite, while Vicente Guerrero was Grand Master of the Yorkistas. The two forces met outside Mexico City and the Yorkinos were victorious.

In the election of 1828, the top leaders of the Yorkino faction ran for the presidency. Feeling ran particularly high against Poinsett with several state legislatures calling for his expulsion from Mexico. After a very controversial election, with Pedraza the legally elected President forced to leave the country, Vicente Guerrero became President of Mexico. He had gained the office through the support of Santa Anna, de Zavala and Poinsett.

So great was the resentment of the Mexican authorities that on July 1, 1829, President Guerrero wrote to Andrew Jackson, the American President, a tactful letter requesting that the envoy be withdrawn from his post. Jackson reluctantly granted the request, but assured Poinsett of his firm confidence that his envoy had done nothing to merit the prejudice which had developed against him in Mexico.

At his installation as Deputy General Grand High Priest, Royal Arch Masons, April 3, 1830, Poinsett defended his action in helping the Mexican brethren saying:

"I have been most unjustly accused of extending our order and our principals into a neighboring country with a view of converting them into an engine of political influence. In the presence of this ... assembly and on the symbols of our order which are spread around me and the sacred book which is open before me I solemnly aver that this accusation is false and unfounded – and that if Masonry has anywhere been converted to any other purposes than that for which it was instituted I have in no way contributed to such perversion of its principles."

By the time Poinsett returned to Charleston, the question of Nullification has arisen with the followers of John C. Calhoun expounding the doctrine that a state had the right to nullify an act of the federal government if it so desired. Poinsett, the ardent nationalist, stood with the forces favoring preservation of the Union against those who favored secession. As Unionist leader in South Carolina, he wrote Andrew Jackson that "Grenades and small rockets are excellent weapons in street fights. I would like to have some of them." Jackson sent them, and South Carolina remained in the Union .

Early in 1837, Martin Van Buren, Jackson's successor, rewarded the Charlestonian for his services to the Union by appointing him Secretary of War, an office for which he was well suited.

Some of the problems confronting him were relations with the Republic of Texas, possible war with Mexico, and the removal of more than sixty thousand red men beyond the Mississippi River. Yet, in 1837, the army numbered less than 8,000 men, the militia was unorganized and untrained, and the country was in the midst of a serious financial panic. Poinsett went to work.

By 1838, the army was enlarged to 12,500 men. He introduced new weapons into the artillery, and created a mobile force organized along European lines. It was this action that made it possible for the United States to win the war with Mexico in 1848.

Among his duties was the transfer of thousands of Indians to the West. It was he who appointed General Winfield Scott to escort more than twenty thousand Cherokees on their "Trail of Tears" in which at least a fifth died on the way.

His term as Secretary of War ended with the inauguration of William Henry Harrison as President in 1841.

Poinsett had maintained an interest in science and the arts. He advocated the application of science to agriculture. His efforts in the field of botany were not unappreciated. He was justly honored when the lovely Christmas flower which he brought from Mexico was named the *Poinsettia pulcherrima* in his honor.

His greatest contribution to the progress of learning in the United States, however was his work in connection with the founding of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science. James Smithson, the illegitimate son of an English lord, had been shunned by British aristocracy and was determined to found an institution in America "for the diffusion of knowledge among men." The South Carolinian gathered about him some of the most learned men in America and, using Smithson's bequest, organized the greatest center of learning known in the world today, the Smithsonian Institution. Poinsett was its first president and thus for a brief time assumed the intellectual leadership of the nation, serving from 1841 until 1845.

Returning to South Carolina, he cautioned against U.S. involvement in a war with Mexico, but favored a course of moderation in dealing with them if it occurred. He actively fought the Calhoun faction that had begun to agitate for secession.

As we look back upon his accomplishments, Joel Roberts Poinsett appears as a true Renaissance man. He was an expert in agriculture and horticulture, a diplomat, a legislator, a Congressman, a Secretary of War, an adviser to the Czar, the founder of The Smithsonian Institution, an active member of our Fraternity, and a lover of our American Union. His influence on our nation during the first half of the Nineteenth Century has been of lasting importance.

On December 12, 1851, shortly after leading the Union party to victory over the secessionists in his native state, Joel Roberts Poinsett died of tuberculosis, hastened by an attack of pneumonia. He had made his last stand for the Union he loved. He was buried in the cemetery of the Church of the Holy Cross, Episcopal, Stateburg, South Carolina.

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